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Reaching the Light at the End of the Tunnel

A Memoir of Persecution and Survival

By Norbert J. Yasharoff

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REACHING THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL:

A Memoir of Persecution and Survival

CHAPTER 1: THE BEGINNING

Norbert Yasharoff was born in Sofia, capital of Bulgaria, on February 18, 1930. His parents were the prominent and well-to-do lawyer Joseph Yasharoff and the nineteen-year-old, Egyptian-born Nelly. By the end of 1934, the Yasharoff family had moved to their own, specially built, three-story house in the center of Sofia, about half a block from the city's main fire station. They led the comfortable life of a typical, high middle-class Bulgarian Jewish family, complete with live-in maid, active socializing, evenings at the theater and the opera, and summer vacations in the countryside.

Norbert and his parents shared the large, second-floor apartment, which -- in contrast to all other flats in the house -- was distinguished by the particular luxury and elegance of its construction and outfitting, with the grandparents on his father's side. Grandpa Nissim was a comparatively short, muscular man with a well-trimmed black moustache and a broken nose that made him look like Dan Kolov, Bulgaria's most popular contribution to European boxing in the early and mid-thirties. Grandma Oro, on the other hand, was a handsome woman, who had inherited the distinguished

looks of her aristocratic family, but lacked the latter's education and refinement. Her relatives treated her with barely concealed pity and derision for having married -- below her station in life --an uneducated, tough-looking man, who packed a revolver while travelling on business and had no easily discernible professional skills. But they must have ultimately resigned themselves to the marriage when they realized Grandpa Nissim was a very good provider.

Nelly became pregnant with Norbert soon after her wedding to Joseph Yasharoff. Her pregnancy coincided with a difficult period of adjustment not only to life with her husband, who was seventeen years her senior and a man set in his ways and possessed of an explosive temper, but also to living under the same roof with her hostile, domineering, and scheming mother-in-law. The older woman, for whom kindness and honesty were synonymous with outright stupidity, took an instant dislike to the sweet-natured, straight-shooting and inexperienced wife of her smart, worldly-wise and shrewd son. Even the fact that Nelly's widowed mother gave Joseph Yasharoff the incredible amount of one million leva as dowry did not ingratiate the hapless young woman with the "dowager queen" of the Yasharoff household who made her life a misery.

The Outbreak of War

In early August, 1939, my parents, my three-year-old sister, Odette, and I went on vacation to the picturesque hamlet of Solu Dervent known for the curative effect of its mineral springs. We stayed at a luxurious, Swiss-operated boarding house, appropriately named "Switzerland." The weather was wonderful, the food served at the hotel was delicious, the group excursions with the relatives and friends, who accompanied us, were very pleasant, and the family visits to the spas were great fun for my sister and me.

But the most memorable event of our vacation was of a completely different nature. Our last day in Solu Dervent was August 31, 1939. In the evening, after a sumptuous dinner that went on for hours, all boarding house guests gathered in the elegant social hall to sip rich Turkish coffee and imported liqueurs and listen to Sofia radio. It was well after midnight when the announcer interrupted the regular program with a special bulletin proclaiming that Poland was invaded by German troops and that Nazi Germany was in a state of war with Great Britain and France. The crowd assembled in the social hall responded with stunned silence. Our own little group was shocked by the news. The single most expressive reaction of concern came from the least expected quarter. Uncle Ezra, the fat, jovial family clown, always ready

with a joke and an optimistic witticism, seemed to speak to himself when he muttered:

" Oh, my God! What is going to happen to us now!?!"

At the time, his words meant nothing to me. I failed to see the connection between us in a peaceful Bulgaria and a war in a faraway place. But there is more that I remember about the scene in the "Switzerland" boarding house in the early hours of September 1, 1939. My father, who was never at a loss for words and always had to offer a wise or witty comment on any subject, had remained unusually silent after hearing the news of the war. His face acquired a grayish color, his lively eyes froze in a glazed look, and his lips were pursed. Still unable to figure out the possible impact of the war on our own fate, I nevertheless started feeling, as a result of my father's reaction, that something truly bad was going on. I suddenly walked to my mother and embraced her in a childish quest for consolation and reassurance.

"I am scared, mommy," I whispered. "Don't be, don't be. Everything is O.K.," she said in a not-so-convincing attempt to console me.

After very little sleep, our group returned to Sofia the following morning.

CHAPTER 2: WORLD WAR II -- THE FIRST YEARS

The first few months after the outbreak of World War II brought no change in the Yasharoff family's comfortable and largely uneventful life. This was a life full of all the good things that money can buy, including Western European clothing purchased on Joseph Yasharoff's frequent travels abroad; a life centered around the immediate and extended family, including very festive celebrations of the major Jewish holidays; a life enriched by plenty of travel and recreation. The Yasharoffs' affluence continued to grow as Norbert's father developed one of the most lucrative law practices not only among Jewish lawyers but also within Bulgaria's entire legal profession. His clients were mostly wealthy and influential people -- businessmen, industrialists and professionals. As for Norbert himself, he began the new 1939 school year as a third grader. In spite of being the only Jew in his class, he was treated with the same religious tolerance that Bulgarian Jews enjoyed before and after Bulgaria regained its independence from Turkish rule in 1878. To the point that when his father complained to the school principal that it was not fair for his son to be participating in religious studies which centered on the New Testament, Norbert was immediately excused from attendance.

But while his Jewishness posed no problems for Norbert in

school, by the end of 1939 he ran across the first manifestations of overt anti-Semitism. Remembering the scene at the "Switzerland" boarding house in the early hours of September 1, he finally began to understand the meaning of those worried exclamations and sad glances. The unsettling effect of the initial public displays of anti-Semitism was reinforced at home by endless discussions about the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, which did not bode well for Bulgarian Jews as well in view of the growing friendship between the Bulgarian government and the Hitler regime -- officially proclaimed neutrality not withstanding. A year later, however, that neutrality began to dissolve in the euphoria of reclaiming from Romania, with the help of German pressure on that country, of the previously Bulgarian region of Dobrudja. This and other "sweeteners" offered by the Nazis finally brought Bulgaria to the point of completely abandoning the pretense of neutrality and inexorably moving in the direction of officially joining the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. Norbert's personal life during this period was shaped by two main factors: his growing interest in girls and his increasing concern for the safety and well-being of his family in the anti-Jewish atmosphere created under the influence of militarily victorious Nazi Germany.

But even before its official joining of the axis, Bulgaria chose to reciprocate its Nazi benefactors' Dobrudja "gift" by

initiating a program of persecutions against its Jewish citizens. The program was developed by one of Bulgaria's most virulent anti-Semites, Alexander Belev, who went to Nuremberg supposedly to study the infamous anti-Jewish laws enacted in that city. In fact, however, he simply translated the German legislation and brought it back to Bulgaria as his own draft law. The latter was different from the German original only in terms of the translation's poor quality. The Belev draft was given the name "Law for the Protection of the Nation" and was approved by the Bulgarian National Assembly in late 1940. Despite the many protests made by writers, artists, professionals, church officials and labor leaders, the law went into effect in early 1941 -- a few months before Bulgaria became on March 1, 1941, an ally of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and conquest-hungry Japan. Its enforcement was assigned to the head of the newly created Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, who was none other than the same pathological Jew hater, Alexander Belev. Applying himself with a vengeance to the performance of his new duties, he lost no time excluding the Jewish population from Bulgaria's society and economy; levying from Jews a heavy, extraordinary tax; confiscating all Jewish property; expropriating Jewish businesses; ordering Jews to stop practicing their trades and professions; banning marriages between Jews and non-Jews; confining Jews to ghettos and forcing them to wear the yellow Star of David badge; and detaining all Jewish males between the ages of 18 and 45 in forced-labor camps.

First Encounter With Anti-Semitism

One early morning in late November of 1939, on the way to school, I made my usual stop in front of my favorite newsstand for my daily diet of front-page news. Living with a father who was an avid "consumer" of political news, I, too, had developed a passion for that kind of printed and broadcast information. This time, however, the banner headline that grabbed my attention was of a shocking nature: "World Jewish Plutocratic Conspiracy Undermines the Economies of Many Nations." The article was accompanied by caricatures of two ugly, fat, crooked-nose Jews laughing contentedly and holding batches of paper money in their hands. The subtitle read: "Bulgarians Must Become Aware of the Jewish Danger." While the last evening at the Solu Dervent boarding house and subsequent conversations at home had somewhat prepared me for an impending change in public attitudes toward the Jews, I was deeply distressed by what I saw on the front page of that newspaper. I was so shook-up and confused that my first impulse was to return home and tell my mother what I had seen. Instead, my good-pupil instincts prevailed and I continued to walk to school. On the way, I wondered whether my Christian class mates had seen the newspaper and worried about their possible reaction. To my great relief, no one seemed to have read the papers that morning, and so I was spared any hostility on the part of my fellow pupils

that could have resulted from the anti-Semitic propaganda in the press. My class mates remained friendly not only that day, but also in the days and weeks to come.

Death of A Friend

The orchestrated spread of anti-Jewish sentiments, which had so far spared our family, suddenly had a direct and troubling effect on my own life. Obviously influenced by anti-Semitic propaganda and his parents' personal prejudices, my neighbor and close friend, Pancho, who used to come every day to play with me in our courtyard, began calling me names, including "Chifut," the Turkish word for "dirty Jew" and blaming us, "Jews, for being crafty, greedy and unpatriotic." Startled and speechless at first, I finally exploded in anger and screamed:

"I wish you would die!"

I was startled myself by the vehemence of my response. What I said was a curse I had never uttered before. Pancho just laughed and left without saying a word.

After this violent verbal exchange, I never saw Pancho again.

As far as I was concerned, our friendship was over. But that was not the reason for his total disappearance from my life. While on vacation with his parents, he suffered a sunstroke and died before regaining consciousness as I learned a couple of days later from an obituary notice pasted (as is the custom in Bulgaria) on the entrance door to his apartment building. My first reaction was one of deep shock followed by a sinking feeling that my curse may have been the cause of his death. My sense of guilt was so profound that I decided to seek redemption by being present at the memorial service for Pancho. I went to the small church situated a few blocks down our street, where at least forty people had gathered to pay their last respects to the deceased. Shaking like a leaf, I could not muster the courage to go inside. Instead, I watched the service through the partly open front door. I could see the coffin, its lid removed, and Pancho's waxen figure lying motionless in it. I could also hear the priest delivering in Church Slavonic the traditional requiem mass with which even I was familiar. My own, clandestine contribution to the service, however, was a quiet recitation of the most popular Hebrew prayer, "Shema Yisrael" ("Hear Oh, Israel"). Feeling somewhat relieved, but still very sad (after all, Pancho was my old buddy), I left before the end of the ceremony and returned home. It took me months to recover from this first experience with mourning someone's demise.

German Troops March Past Grandpa's Funeral Procession

Several months later, in March, 1941, I was in mourning again. This time I mourned the death of Grandpa Nissim whose attitude towards me had always been so kind and loving. I had reciprocated those feelings not only because I genuinely liked him, but also because I had so often commiserated with him about the harsh treatment to which my father and Grandma Oro had subjected him during the last years of his life -- years during which my ability to commit events to memory made the transition from an unquestioning, childish "registration" of happenings to a more mature and analytical storage of mental records. The harsh treatment usually took the form of violent verbal lashing over some trivial act or statement on the part of the old man that had displeased his ever-ready-to-dispense-punishment tormentors. It stemmed from the fact, as I later realized, that both his son and his wife despised him for his lack of education and refined manners.

The great irony of Grandpa's fate was the way he was treated after he died. The man whose life was full of rejection and humiliation was buried with the pomp and honors usually bestowed on people of distiction. Considering the fact that Bulgaria's continuing rapprochement with Nazi Germany had prompted it to

grant unimpeded passage to German troops on their way to the Greek front, Grandpa's funeral was truly daring in its concept and execution. It was organized as a procession through the streets of Sofia in which, following the horse-driven hearse, the Chief Rabbi of Bulgaria and four other rabbis led a long line of mourners. The latter included -- in that order -- members of the immediate and extended family, children from the Sofia Jewish orphanage of which father was one of the main leaders and benefactors, friends and acquaintances, father's professional colleagues and clients, leaders of the Jewish Consistory, the Jewish Religious Court and other Jewish organizations, representatives of the Bar Association, and many poor people who had been helped by father at one time or another. The procession's planned route extended from our downtown house to the Jewish cemetery, a good three miles away. At one point, just as we were slowly proceeding down one of the capital's main streets, a detachment of German soldiers appeared at the opposite end of the street and marched in semi-goose-step in our direction. I froze in my tracks, feverishly moving my glance from one procession to the other. What registered clearly in my mind was the fact that, at the moment the two processions were alongside each other, they proceeded on their way without exchanging as much as a glance. Taking place under the most unusual of circumstances, my first encounter with the advance troops of the Third Reich was over in a matter of minutes, but remained engraved in my childish

memory.

Accused of Spying

Unreciprocated romantic interest was the indirect cause of another experience with the vulnerable status of Jews in the atmosphere of surging anti-Semitism. Several weeks after Grandpa's funeral, an acquaintance of mine called Herbert and I went to meet our friend Rennie in front of her apartment building -- two blocks from the Soviet Embassy. Arriving punctually at the appointed place, we were not surprised to find that the object of our amorous dreams, true to her habit of choosing and discarding clothes until the last minute, was still not there. We did not hold this against her because her vanity was fully justified by her almost mature beauty. It was amazing that a ten-year-old girl was as sexy as a woman twice her age. My strong infatuation was obvious to her even through the thick shield of my extreme shyness. She treated me, however, with complete indifference -- as one of her many, taken-for-granted admirers.

Prepared for a long wait, Herbert and I moved to a spot across the street from the entrance to Rennie's building. A number of taxicabs were parked along the sidewalk on which we stood, but none

of them seemed to take passengers and drive away from the station. At one point, I realized that Herbert was no longer standing next to me and then, a few minutes later, a tall, tough looking man ran towards one of the cabs, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Stop it! Stop it! Catch this boy."

Then I saw Herbert kneeling next to a cab, busy letting the air out of its right rear tire. Just as the man was about to grab him by the waist, Herbert managed to wiggle out of this unwelcome embrace and ran quickly away, disappearing into the first intersection. Frustrated, the man, whom I assumed was a cab driver, came to me and said:

"You are his friend, aren't you?"

Without hesitation and in full sincerity, I answered in the affirmative.

"Then you'll take me to him," added the man, assuming correctly that I knew where Herbert could be found.

Indeed, with Rennie accompanying us, we were supposed to meet in a little while in the courtyard of Jacques, another friend of ours.

With the man holding me firmly by the arm, we got within minutes to Jacques's apartment building. I opened the side door leading to the courtyard, pointed to Herbert who was standing calmly in a corner and, when the man let go of my arm, I made a lightning dash in the direction of our house a few blocks away. Out of breath, I related to mother the whole incident and, although very worried herself, she did her best to calm me down. At that point, neither she nor I had any explanation for what had happened. Half an our later, some of the mystery began to lift when the presumed "cab driver," accompanied by a contentedly smirking Herbert, rang our bell and introduced himself to mother as State Security agent Ivanov. Without divulging any additional information, he handed her a note ordering father to report, together with me, at 2 p.m. that afternoon to the office of State Security inspector Nikolov. When father came for lunch a few minutes later and read the note, he exploded in uncontrollable rage, blaming the whole imbroglio on my utter stupidity.

At 2 p.m. sharp, father and I arrived at the State Security building. I was ushered immediately into a small room whose entire furniture consisted of a desk and a chair and was told to write a detailed deposition about the incident. At the age of ten, with my writing experience limited to two-page compositions, it took me two hours to commit to paper, in my elaborate handwriting and flowery

style, the happenings of that morning. Finally, I was led to the office of inspector Nikolov, a stern looking, bald man in shirt sleeves, seated behind a huge desk. A few minutes later, my father was brought in. He greeted the inspector as someone he knew well (from court appearances, as I later learned -- the inspector having been a practicing lawyer before assuming his present position). Nikolov did not return father's greeting and, from this point on, conducted the conversation without eye contact, his head turned away in the direction of the window. Getting straight to the point, Nikolov lifted the veil of mystery by revealing that the "taxicabs" and their "drivers" were part of State Security surveillance of the Soviet Embassy with the task of following any car that came out of the Soviet compound. It was, therefore tantamount to sabotage against the security of the state to do anything that might prevent the cabs from taking off in pursuit of the suspect Soviet diplomats. The inspector was getting more and more enraged and excited as he spoke.

"You Jews raise your children in an anti-Bulgarian, anti-nationalist, anti-government spirit with the obvious purpose of preparing them for sabotage activity," he shouted, his face still turned to the window.

My father tried to rebut these accusations.

"This is outrageous," he said. "Neither I nor any other Jewish father, and certainly none of our children, knew of the 'taxicabs' secret mission. If your operation was supposed to be conducted in such utter secrecy," he added, "how can you assume that it was known to us, a much distrusted, strictly controlled and virtually isolated minority. Besides, we have always raised our children to be good and loyal citizens of Bulgaria. We don't even teach them the Spanish dialect of our forefathers so that they would speak the Bulgarian language as true Bulgarians."

Speaking with disdain, Nikolov ordered my father to stop using "Jew lawyer tactics" and listen to his "superiors." Shocked, my father stopped talking. Suddenly, this authoritative and self-confident man, good looking and elegantly dressed, began to look as though he was shrinking in size -- at least in my eyes.
It was painful to watch his humiliation and inability to defend either himself or me. Albeit it unfairly, I even started losing some of my respect for him. He was quietly and obediently listening to Nikolov's tirades, he who had been the epitome of Bulgarian patriotism and good citizenship throughout his life.

Finally, the matter was settled with a threat of graver consequences if "this violation of state security" were to be repeated and with a 500-leva fine, the equivalent at that time of

almost 500 dollars. As we learned later, Herbert and his father went through the same procedure with another inspector and were given the same penalty. By the time the questioning ended, even inspector Nikolov must have been convinced that Herbert and I were not used by any anti-government conspirators and that the whole incident was the act of a 10-year-old, with my "crime" being that I just watched and did nothing to stop him. Emotionally drained by the investigative interview, father and I went home by streetcar -- without any exchange of either words or glances. When we turned on foot into our street, we could see from afar that a crowd - mostly children as far as I could tell -- had gathered in front of our garden gate. Father started walking faster ahead of me and suddenly disappeared through the front door of a neighbor's house in an obvious attempt to avoid the crowd. I continued my hesitant advance to where my mother was standing, surrounded by what looked like half the neighborhood. The crowd gave me a hero's welcome, complete with hugs, kisses and handshakes. My mother, looking pale and dishevelled, embraced me warmly -- unable to stop crying. She led me away from our wonderfully supportive neighbors and into our house. The day of the "improbable spies" was finally over.

Exorcism of "The Jewish Spirit"

The ground-level apartment in our house was leased to the

Balsamovs. He was a prominent lawyer and, by all appearances, a pretty decent man in spite of his Fascist sympathies. His wife Herta, a German who spoke Bulgarian with a heavy accent, was anything but decent. Aloof, cranky and openly anti-Semitic, she quickly earned the hostility of all neighbors who called her "the blond bitch" behind her back.

Prompted by persistent rumors that a harshly anti-Jewish Law for the Protection of the Nation, to include a provision for the confiscation of real property, would go into effect in early 1941, and taking advantage of her husband's connections with people in the high echelons of the Fascist establishment, Jew-hating Herta decided to force us out of our apartment and move into it with Mr. Balsamov well in advance of the planned confiscation. On a courtesy visit to our home a few months earlier, she had admired the long and wide living room running along the full length of the flat's center, the ceilings' carved stucco, the silk-covered walls of the rooms and other special features. "Oh, I wish I lived in an apartment like this!," she had repeatedly exclaimed. By the fall of 1940, her wish became reality. One morning we were visited by a representative of the city government who gave us a one-week notice to move into the ground-floor apartment currently occupied by the Balsamovs so that they could move into ours. The City Hall official was extremely polite and tried to sweeten the blow by insisting

that the swap was in our best interest and would avoid ruffling the feathers of some very influential people. My parents, of course, did not even try to protest, promising to vacate the apartment within seven days, hopefully finding a way to coordinate our move with that of the Balsamovs. The "exchange" of dwellings proceeded without incident and, within a few weeks, we received, in utter amazement, a printed invitation to a ceremony at the Balsamovs', described as a "religious inauguration" of their new abode. On the day of the inaugural, attending it was the last thing my parents wanted, but they went upstairs at the appointed time for fear that their absence might antagonize the Fascist hosts. Forty-five minutes later they were back, looking shaken and pale as though they had just buried a loved one. They had left right after the end of the ceremony, which had turned out to be a sort of baptismal ritual aimed at cleansing the apartment from the "foul Jewish spirit that had resided in it before." Herta's viciousness knew no limits. What human being would have the ejected Jewish occupants of her new home attend a ceremony designed to get rid even of their spirit. You can imagine how difficult it was to live in the same building with that Nazi woman and her Fascist husband.

Moving to The Ghetto

Fortunately, the extremely tense and unpleasant experience of

sharing a building with the Balsamovs came to an end only months after they had forced us out of our home. Under the ghettoization provision of the draconian Law for the Protection of the Nation, which went into effect in early 1941, our family was ordered to relocate to a dwelling either within the area of Sofia's Jewish quarter or in close proximity to it. We ended up sharing an apartment situated within the perimeters of the ghetto with the family of Sandro Arie, a cousin of my father on his mother's side.

The new environment must have stirred up my artistic proclivities, and suddenly I started producing cute little poems in well structured verses and impeccable rhymes. Father seemed to be very proud of me and kept asking me to recite them to the Aries and visiting neighbors.

The Execution of Father's Client

By mid-1942, implementation of the Law for the Protection of the Nation had become not only strict, but also vicious. The viciousness was introduced under pressure from the German government which wanted the Bulgarians to start preparing their public opinion, through openly drastic persecutions, for the eventual deportation of the Jews to the death camps in Poland. A

typical example of the newly intensified witch-hunt were the trials of Jewish businessmen on trumped up charges of such violations of war-time economic laws as profiteering, black-market activity and price fixing. One of the businessmen tried for profiteering was an old-time client of my father called, if I remember correctly, Haim Bakish. A former owner of a textile plant, who -- because of his unrivaled expertise -- was allowed by the Fascist government to continue working in it in the capacity of manager, Mr. Bakish was the victim of a plot cleverly concocted by the authorities and a few of the plant employees for the purpose of setting him up as a law-breaker. He decided that he needed my father, his trusted Jewish lawyer, to defend him against what he considered to be ridiculously unsubstantiated charges. Granted the privilege to continue practicing his profession under a special provision of the anti-Jewish law that rewarded some Jews for their special contributions to the state, father immediately accepted the assignment in spite of the almost certain prospect of his client being sentenced to death. He invested all of his time, energy and juridical talent in the preparation of the defense hoping against hope that the accomplished courtroom tactics that had helped him win so many civil cases in the past would work their miracles again and save Bakish's life. The trial lasted three months and each day of it was a depressing experience for our family. Father used to come home from the courthouse in such a foul mood that the rest of us kept complete silence for fear of not saying anything that would

even remotely remind him of the trial. His task as defense counsel was made all the more difficult by the nasty media campaign in favor of capital punishment for "economic criminals, especially Jewish profiteers."

In spite of father's valiant efforts, Mr.Bakish was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. Deeply pained and feeling remorseful about failing to save his client's life, despite the undisputable fact that the trial's outcome was preordained, father was inconsolable. My sister and I were on our best behavior in order not to cause the least additional aggravation. The day before the death sentence was to be carried out, father was ordered by the judge to be present at the execution, with the warning that he would be in contempt of court and jailed if he failed to do so. The atmosphere at home was so tense and gloomy the following morning that I seem to have blocked the details out of my mind. I remember, though, very vividly father's return around noontime. His face was as white as chalk, his eyes lifeless, his walk shaky as though he was having a dizzy spell. Without saying a word, he rushed to the bathroom where he spent fifteen long minutes vomiting everything he had eaten in the last few days. The horror of what he had been forced to observe was aggravated not only by the fact that he had never been present at an execution, but also -- and mainly - by the deep friendship that linked him to the executed man above and beyond their lawyer-client relationship. Many a day passed

before father could fully recover from this devastating trauma. As for me, the memory of it is as alive today as the actual experience itself.

Helping Father Avoid Arrest

By the end of 1942, those provisions of the Law for the Protection of the Nation, which had not been implemented so far, were now being enforced with utmost zeal and ferociousness. These measures included the detention of all Jewish males between the ages of 18 and 45 in forced-labor camps; the imposition of a nighttime curfew for Jews from 9 p.m. till dawn; the edict depriving Jews of the right not only of owning radio sets but also of listening to broadcasts, especially those of the Allied Powers; and the compulsory wearing of yellow Star of David badges by all Jews above the age of ten.

For me, the major problem with the yellow badge was wearing it in school. In contrast to the teachers who continued to display a fair and decent attitude as before, my classmates treated me either as a leper or as an inferior person. Most painful, however, was the ritual of greeting each teacher in successive classes during the school day by the loud recitation of the slogan: "For King and Country -- Always Ready to Die!", accompanied by the Nazi salute.

Depending on the nature of the class, the slogan was recited in Bulgarian, Latin and German. How I survived, as the only Jew in my class, an entire school year in such a hostile environment -- I really do not know. But I did and, although not permitted to attend the graduation ceremony, I did get my junior-high school diploma in a silent transaction at the principal's office.

With the persecution of Jews in its most intensive stage, the start of 1943 delivered a new blow to the Jewish community in Bulgaria: the gradual arrest of its leaders. It began in the capital city of Sofia, the seat of all major Jewish institutions. Using the ludicrous charge of sabotage activity, agents of the Commissariat for Jewish affairs arrested with police assistance several members of the Consistory of Jews in Bulgaria, the central body of Jewish religious self-government. This action was followed by the arrest of a number of other prominent Jews: journalists, writers, artists, physicians, engineers and other professionals. The probability of father's arrest grew with every passing day. With mother hospitalized because of complications caused by a miscarriage, my sister and I were the only ones with whom father could share his apprehensions about a possible detention. And I, being the family's main worrier, took it upon myself to devise an escape plan. The strategy I developed had the advantages of being not too hard to execute (even if somewhat risky) and -- most important of all -- fully acceptable to father. Ii consisted of

three stages. First, the early-warning one: my sister and I would take turns serving as lookouts on the balcony facing Pirotska street and sounding the alert, so to speak, whenever suspicious individuals were approaching the entrance to our building. Second, the implementation stage: satisfied that an alarm situation existed, we would place on father's back the packed-in-advance knapsack containing toiletries as well as basic clothes and food items. Then my sister and I would help him climb over the balcony railing and attach himself securely to the drain pipe that ran all the way from our second-floor apartment to the street-level little garden in the front of the building. We would also help him get a firm hold on the thick rope that had the same length as the drain pipe and ran parallel to it -- to provide him with extra support in his risky descent. Once on the ground, father would signal us and we would untie the rope from its hook at our end and throw it to him so he can hide it in the bushes. Third, the stalling stage: with people (presumably Commissariat agents and policemen) ringing the bell, my sister and I would open the door, pretend that we were just two helpless and frightened kids who knew only that their fatherhad had gone to a meeting (in spite of the curfew !?!), and invite the unwelcome visitors to make sure that there was no one else in the apartment. We were never called upon to carry out the third stage of the plan, but over a period of one month we did have a number of false alarms which, luckily, went only as far as implementing the first and second stages of our scheme. After

awhile, more ominous developments began to absorb our attention and we shelved our escape plan. My sister and I, however, continued to be very proud of our efforts to ensure that father did not get arrested.

CHAPTER 3: FORCED RESETTLEMENT INSTEAD OF DEPORTATION

As it turned out, the drastic implementation of anti-Jewish measures was a prelude to the ultimate punishment: the deportation of all Bulgarian Jews to the mass-murder "factories" in Poland in the spring of 1943. Early that year, Adolf Eichmann's special emissary, Theodor Danneker, one of the top Nazi experts on Jewish affairs, came to Bulgaria and together with the Commissar for Jewish Affairs, Alexander Belev, worked out a plan to deport the Jews of Bulgaria proper as well as those living in the territories of Macedonia and Thrace that became Bulgarian zones of occupation after being conquered by the Germans. The deportations were to be accomplished in stages. The first groups scheduled for removal in March-April 1943 included the 11,500 Jewish inhabitants of the Bulgarian-occupied areas of Greece and Yugoslavia as well as 8,500 of the almost 50,000 Jews residing within the old boundaries of Bulgaria. The first to go were the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia whose deportation to Treblinka was carried out quietly and efficiently in the beginning of March. As for the first contingent of Jews from Bulgaria proper, who were to have the same fate, the process of their deportation began during the night of March 8-9, when most of the Jewish residents of at least seventeen major provincial cities were secretly rounded up and herded into makeshift detention camps. In the city of Kyustendil, where all

Jews were to be deported, friendly Bulgarian Christians leaked news of the secret plan to local Jewish leaders, who received confirmation from helpful gentiles in Sofia. Confident of their long-standing friendship with their Christian neighbors, Kyustendil Jews turned for help to a group of non-Fascist local officials, whose response was amazing in its audacity. A three-man delegation was hurriedly dispatched to Sofia to plead with the government to rescind the impending deportations. On March 9, 1943, the delegation met with their fellow townsman Dimitar Peshev, who, in addition to being Kyustendil's parliamentary representative, was also vice president of the National Assembly. The three emissaries impressed on Peshev the need for speedy action. The Fascist government of Professor Bogdan Filov, they insisted, had to order the release of all detained Jews and cancel all planned deportations. Despite his Germanophile background and the fact that he had voted in the National Assembly in favor of the anti-Jewish laws, Peshev's conscience was deeply disturbed when confronted with the real possibility of sending Bulgaria's entire Jewish population to certain death -- on top of all the Jewish communities in the Bulgarian-occupied regions of Yugoslavia and Greece.

Peshev immediately contacted the minister of interior, Petar Gabrovsky, threatening him, and through him the prime minister, that he would cause a major parliamentary scandal if the orders to

deport Jews living within the old boundaries of Bulgaria were not rescinded. As a recent historical study points out, this threat not only managed to scare Minister Gabrovsky, but also made him feel truly ashamed of the deportation decree he had issued. To Peshev's amazement, the minister became confused and agitated and, after a phone conversation with Prime Minister Filov, started calling the governors of all participating districts to inform them that the whole deportation operation had been called off and instructed them to release without delay all Jews detained in their jurisdictions. Thus ended the first attempt to deport Bulgarian Jews to the Nazi-run gas chambers.

But Peshev, whose courageous intervention remained largely unknown to those he had saved, did not confine himself to securing the temporary cancellation of the deportations. He was set on permanently foiling the plans of Nazi Germany and the Fascist Filov regime to send Bulgarian Jews to their deaths in Poland. As vice president of the National Assembly, he succeeded in obtaining the support of a sufficient number of deputies, as required by the rules of parliamentary procedure, in order to introduce a bill stripping the Commissar for Jewish Affairs of the authority to forcibly banish Jews from Bulgaria. His practical objective was to prevent the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs from handling Bulgarian Jewry in the same manner in which it handled the Jews of Macedonia

and Thrace, namely "delivering" them to the Germans for extermination. His 43 supporters in parliament also signed a document asking King Boris III and his government "not to sully Bulgaria's honor with so barbarous a crime." In the words of an Italian writer, "The most confounding aspect of this parliamentary initiative was the fact that the 43 signatures collected by Peshev for his protest motion came not from the benches of the so-called opposition, but from the ranks of the pro-government and ideologically Fascist deputies who until then had been unquestioning admirers of Nazi Germany."

Eliciting strong opposition from the Fascist government and a majority of its parliamentary supporters, Peshev's bill was defeated on the floor of the National Assembly. At the request of the prime minister, and with theblessing of King Boris III, Peshev himself was censured and removed from the assembly's vice presidency. Following that, he became a non-person, living in near seclusion, branded as a traitor for an act that he himself considered to be the apogee of morality, shunned by the political and social elite of which he had been a very popular member, and followed wherever he went by agents of the State Security Agency. In spite of all this, he still made a few appearances in the National Assembly and, although barred from taking the floor and voting, managed on two occasions to grab the microphone and

deliver impassioned speeches against the anti-Jewish and pro-Nazi policies of the government. Peshev also managed to obtain personal interviews with Prime Minister Filov to plead for a change in Bulgaria's political course. As for his fate after the war and the role Norbert's father played in shaping it, the story will be told in a later chapter.

Already at that time, the people who knew about it fully recognized that, by acting so fearlessly against the deportation of Jews, Peshev had embarked on a self-destructive mission. But had he not undertaken it, Bulgarian Jewry would have perished in its entirety. By bringing about the cancellation of the first deportation order, he gained the time for Germany's military reversals to convince the Bulgarian government that cooperation with Berlin on the Jewish issue was no longer in Bulgaria's best interests. But before that change of heart and policy occurred, the Bulgarian authorities tried to "compensate" the Germans for failing to carry out the agreed-upon deportation plan by ordering the expulsion of all Jews living in Sofia and a few other major cities to towns near the Danube River from which they could, if so decided, be more easily transported to Poland. The expulsion order was not announced publicly, but came in the form of individual pink notices that started arriving in the homes of Jewish residents of Sofia on the eve of May 24, 1943, the date on which every year Bulgarians celebrate their Day of Education and Culture in honor of

Saints Cyrill and Methodius, the two Bulgarian-born brothers who created the Cyrillic alphabet. The government's expectation was that its drastic anti-Jewish measure would pass unnoticed amid the holiday marches and other festivities. This expectation, however, did not materialize. In the early morning of May 24, Jewish leaders rushed to the royal palace, hoping to be given a chance to plead with the king in person. But His Majesty had cleverly avoided such a possibility by sneaking away to one of his out-of-town retreats. In a panic, the would-be Jewish negotiators then tried and succeeded to obtain an audience with Metropolitan (Archbishop) Stefan, head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a staunch supporter of the Jews and an outspoken critic of the government's anti-Semitic policies. Told about the authorities' latest act of persecution, the metropolitan cancelled his participation in the religious ceremony scheduled to open the holiday celebrations and hurried to the royal palace. In the absence of the king, he left him a strongly worded note in which he warned Boris III that a terrible punishment would descend upon him from Heaven if he did not call off the Jews' expulsion from Sofia and other large cities. Metropolitan Stefan suspected (and as it later transpired, his suspicion was fully justified) that the expulsion was only the first part of a two-phase process that would ultimately end up deporting all Bulgarian Jews to the Nazi extermination camps in Poland. It was this suspicion that drove the church leader to use such unthinkably disrespectful language in his written communication to the king. But while the second phase of the

expulsion process never materialized, Stefan's intervention did not succeed in preventing the first one, and within four days from the receipt of the forced-resettlement notices, all Jewish residents of Sofia were on their way to their assigned locations.

With the help of influential gentile friends, Norbert's father managed to get the city of Pleven in northern Bulgaria as the assigned place of resettlement not only for his immediate family, including Grandma Rachel, but also for the family of his sister, Lisa. Pleven was the city in which Isaac Sidi, Lisa's husband, was born, and he had two sisters who lived there, one of whom, Sofie, occupied the house that once belonged to their parents. The plan was for the Yasharoffs and Sidis to share the house with Isaac's sister Sofie and her family -- at least for a few months.

Life in Pleven proved to be less unpleasant than originally expected. With the passage of time, most of the "technical" restrictions imposed on Jews were either lifted or their enforcement ignored, especially when it became obvious that Germany was losing the war. And after King Boris III's sudden and mysterious death in the summer of 1943, successive new governments -- while retaining the anti-Jewish legislation as originally enacted -- adopted a much more tolerant attitude toward the Jews and, seeing no need to implement the so-called second phase of the Dannecker-Belev plan, let it die the natural death of a

bureaucratic abomination.

For Bulgarian Jewry, the end of Fascist oppression came without warning on September 9, 1944. First partisans and then Soviet troops took control of the country. A Communist-dominated coalition of anti-Fascist parties was installed by the Soviets, with the approval of their Western allies, as Bulgaria's first "democratic" government. With all anti-Jewish measures having already been revoked, at least on paper, by one of the two last Fascist governments, the new Bulgarian leadership lost no time in restoring, in practice, the situation of Jews as it existed prior to January 29, 1941. Priority was given to the return of real estate property. As a result, the Yasharoffs regained possession of their house on 24 Benkovska Street and moved back into their old apartment in early October 1944.

Banished from Our Native City

I could have reconstructed from memory the eventful days preceding and immediately following our family's forced resettlement from Sofia, the capital, to the provincial city of Pleven. I have chosen, instead, to let the story be told by the letter I sent my uncle Narcisse on June 26, 1943. He was, in

actuality, a cousin whom I addressed as uncle because of our age difference. With his wife and baby daughter, he had been banished to the city of Russe on the Danube River. My letter was mailed to him less than a month after our departure from Sofia, and the impressions recorded in it had the freshness and immediacy of a newspaper report. Written in the elaborate calligraphy and flowery style of a thirteen-year-old boy, it is considered by those who have read it, including archivists at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, to be a valuable eyewitness account. Not having preserved even a draft of the letter, I assumed that I will never be able to refresh my memory of those fateful days by re-reading it. But then, forty-six years later, on a visit to Israel, his widow Mahlie (Narcisse had died ten years earlier) handed me several faded sheets of paper. It took me a few minutes to realize that it was my own 1943 letter from Pleven that I was holding in my hand. Poor uncle Narcisse had so carefully preserved it throughout the years that his survivors had inherited it fully intact. And now his wife was giving it back to me -- in a touching gesture meant to ensure, as she put it, "that this piece of history as recorded by a teen-age boy would continue to be treasured with the same care and love with which Narcisse had kept it for so many years."

Here, in my own translation from the Bulgarian-language original, are selected excerpts from the letter:

" Dear Uncle Narcisse,

Now that our closely knit family is scattered all over the country, your letter...came as a soothing greeting ...and resounded in our tormented hearts like the chimes of a bell ringing as if to summon us back to our abandoned homes. But beneath the surface of your encouraging words, one could detect notes of deep sadness, especially when you describe your feelings upon learning some of the details of our last days in Sofia. Imagine, though, what it was like going through the actual ordeal! It was terrible, almost impossible to describe. But I will try to relate those moments as best I can. Now that we have again a roof over our heads, I find it somewhat easier to recall them.

"...I am still haunted by the terror of that night, the night of May 22-23. As darkness fell, the rumor of an impending roundup and forced transfer to Poland spread like bush fire among the Jews of Sofia. Still dazed by the many other blows that fate had visited on them in recent months, these poor people were now clinging to one last hope -- that a last-minute divine intervention would save them from deportation...

"The four of us spent the night huddled in the living room. We were all thinking the same gloomy thoughts, but none of us expressed them. My own thoughts seemed to be racing in all directions. At one point, they...flew to the forced-labor camp in

which you, dear Uncle Narcisse, had been languishing for months together with thousands of other Jewish men. And I saw you in my imagination -- sleeping quietly in your tent, completely unaware of what was happening to us.

"A barely suppressed sigh interrupted my train of thoughts. It was father. With Odette sleeping peacefully on his lap, a deeply disturbed look on his face, he suddenly shook his head and burst out crying. In a quivering voice, he said to me and to Odette, who was now wide awake, that the time may come when, in order to ensure our safety, mother and he could be forced to leave us in the care of others. At this, we all started crying uncontrollably...

"Dawn finally brought an end to what seemed like an interminable bad dream. It also brought the first hard news in many a day: several families in the Jewish quarter of Yuch Bounar had received notices to report in three days for resettlement in the provinces. As bad as it was in its own right, this piece of news came as a relief to the residents of the ghetto for it meant, at least, that they were not being handed over to the Germans for transfer to Poland. Within hours, however, relief was replaced by deep anguish once people started wondering how they would survive in exile without housing, without money and without jobs. The fear of eventually ending up in concentration camps in the provinces was constantly at the back of their minds. For these working-class

Jews, poorly educated and on the brink of poverty as they were, the resettlement notices had the effect of a...major calamity...In their panic and confusion, their first impulse was to rush for help and guidance to the offices of the Jewish Community Council. Council officials, however, were of very little assistance -- partly because of bureaucratic insensitivity and partly because of their own bewilderment and helplessness. There being no one else to turn to, Yuch Bounar residents, as well as their co-religionists in other ghetto areas of the city, sought solace from their spiritual leaders. Indeed, that evening hundreds of Jews gathered in the city's Central Synagogue...At the end of the prayer services, the Chief Rabbi urged the agitated congregation not to give in to panic and despair. He appealed to them to summon all their fortitude and faith in the Almighty, assuring them that God's limitless kindness and power were bound to prevent, or put an end to, all acts of evil against His chosen people. On its way out of the synagogue, the large crowd of worshipers seemed somewhat relieved and encouraged by the rabbi's words.

"May 24. Today was a day of Jewish demonstrations and Church protests against the expulsion from Sofia... The two days that followed were just as bleak and tense. The time had come to bid farewell to Aunt Bertha, Berto, Uncle Nissim, his wife Suzanah and their baby boy. They were part of the first Jewish contingent to leave Sofia on its way to resettlement in the provinces. With their

departure, the edifice of our extended family was beginning to crumble. Its first pillar was collapsing in the abyss of uncertainty.

"The last few hours before the final good-byes were the worst. We were all assembled in Aunt Bertha's large living room. I never expected to see this strong woman, who had replaced Grandma Oro as the 'rock of the family,' cry so helplessly. We all cried, asking ourselves the same question, 'Are we going to see each other again?'

"Our silent grief was made all the more painful by the noises coming from the street.

"In preparation for departure, Jews were disposing of most of their belongings by selling them for a pittance to the hordes of gentiles who had 'invaded' Yuch Bounar, eager to cash in on the misfortune of their Jewish fellow countrymen. (What a strange mix, I thought to myself while surveying the scene, of heartless greed on the one hand and a long record of tolerance and friendship on the other!) The wares, slowly acquired and lovingly preserved over the years, were strewn on blankets on the sidewalks in front of the sellers' soon to be abandoned homes. The would-be buyers were circling like vultures around each heap of household items, rummaging, grabbing, and bargaining even beyond the bare-minimum

prices.

"In the midst of this bedlam, a horse-drawn cab was slowly making its way to Aunt Bertha's house. Its approach set off the last round of tearful embraces. Aunt Bertha was hugging Papa, her beloved brother, with such desperation that Nissim and Berto had to pull her away. One by one, they all got into the cab -- Suzanah holding the baby in her arms, Berto, Nissim and then Aunt Bertha. Wan smiles, suppressed tears, hands waving in final 'farewell,' and the carriage disappeared around the corner. Aunt Bertha and her family were gone. We felt as though we had just attended a funeral: crushed, dazed, weak in the knees.

" On the following day, albeit far from recovered, we had to muster the strength for yet another ordeal of separation. This time it was your immediate family, Uncle Narcisse, that we were seeing off: your father Solomon, your sister Beatrice, her husband Bentsion and her son Gravcho,and your wife Mahlie. You were not there, of course (the Fascists did not even have the decency of granting you temporary release from the labor camp so you could prepare your family for resettlement), but you were constantly in our thoughts...Tears, hugs, kisses, words of mutual encouragement, and your family was gone, too. Another pillar of our extended family had collapsed.

" Our own departure for Pleven, the northern city to which father had arranged that we be relocated since Uncle Isaac had family there, was only a couple of days away. Mother was still recovering from a recent hospitalization and without her active participation we seemed unable to properly prepare for the move. ...Slowly, clumsily, and rather ineptly father and I, with Odette's mostly unwelcome assistance, struggled from early morning till late at night with the task of 'dismantling' the household. Grandma Rachel was unable to help us because she was visiting with her youngest daughter, Ninette, on the eve of the latter's departure for Palestine. So, the three of us sorted out our possessions, packed some of them to take along with us, and either sold, gave away, or moved for safekeeping to the homes of Christian friends the remaining household items. Since Grandma Rachel was coming with us to Pleven, we had to pack her things as well.

" Miraculously, the day of our departure found us all ready to go... As if completely oblivious to the journey's real nature, Odette and I approached the whole thing like going on vacation, and when the horse-drawn cab pulled up at the curb, we cheerfully hopped into it.

" At the Central Railway Station, father's sister Lisa, her husband Isaac, daughter Zita and son Bettie were waiting for us. The thought of travelling together to Pleven and the prospect of

living together in the same place of resettlement made us feel more secure. A railroad inspector, whom father had known for years, came up to where we stood and shook hands with us. It took real courage for a government official to be seen fraternizing with Jews, especially when they were being shipped away as 'enemies of the state.' It was obvious that he felt ashamed about the way we were being treated and wanted to show us that there were Bulgarian Christians who did not approve of this treatment. Silently, he led us to a car usually reserved for top government and railroad officials, unlocked the door of a freshly cleaned compartment and motioned us in. After helping us with the luggage, he abruptly left, without uttering a word, his eyes full of tears.

" Some minutes later, the train pulled out of the station. Sofia, the eternal resting place of our dearly departed Grandpa Nissim, Grandma Oro and your mother Douda, the city to with which we were linked by so many fond memories, quickly receded in the distance. The journey itself, at least for Odette and me, was very pleasant. How could one not enjoy the cool but sunny weather, and the striking beauty of the changing scenery?

" By the time we reached Pleven, the weather had changed. We alighted the train in the midst of a torrential downpour. We were met at the station by Viza, Uncle Isaac's elder sister, and taken by horse carriage to her house in the city center...Viza turned out

to be a real 'angel of mercy.' Having already provided shelter to two other Jewish families from Sofia, she and her husband moved to the attic in order to accommodate father, mother, Odette and me in their own bedroom. We spent two restful days in Viza's home in an atmosphere of affectionate hospitality.

" On the third day we moved into the house that had once belonged to Uncle Isaac's parents and was now owned by his younger sister Sofie and her family. Grandma Rachel, mother, father, Odette and I were given the largest and best situated room in the house, a room that offered direct access to the backyard, with its wide flower beds and tall trees. 'Well,' I remember thinking at the time, 'if that's what resettlement is all about, then it isn't that bad!'...True we are all crammed in one room, we are not allowed to hold jobs, own radios, and leave the city, and there is no knowing whether Jewish children will be permitted to attend school when classes resume in September. But unlike other cities where Jews are under curfew restrictions several times a day and are barred from most public places, in Pleven we have only a night-time curfew and practically no prohibited areas. All in all, we can say that we ar e quite well [as it turned out, however, resettlement proved to be not so benign, especially for Jews of lesser means -- author's note].

" All we can do for now is thank the Lord that our worst fears

have not materialized; express gratitude to Him for our good health and for the fairly decent living conditions we still enjoy; and beg Him in our prayers for an early return to our homes and for the speedy fulfillment thereafter of our Zionist dream: settling in the Land of Israel.

Amen!

With all my love,

Norbert"

Life in Pleven

Living in Sofie's house, as crowded as it was, allowed us nevertheless to lead an almost normal life not devoid of occasional pleasures such as early-evening, well-prepared suppers under the shadow of the tall trees; visits to the city, its markets, parks and movie theaters (the latter having remained, for reasons of anticipated higher profits, accessible to Jews); as well as unimpeded socializing with other Jews and, on rare occasions, with local, non-Jewish residents.

Life in "internal exile" was fairly comfortable (in the material sense) for our immediate family and our relatives. This was mainly due to the money that father had left with his law partner, Mr. Minkovsky, with the understanding that the trusted

colleague would be regularly travelling to Pleven to bring sufficient amounts of those funds for the needs of our extended family.

As I wrote in the diary I started keeping upon arrival in Pleven, for the majority of Sofia Jews forcibly relocated to Pleven, however, life was very difficult indeed. Being people of modest means even before the implementation of the anti-Jewish laws, now -- deprived of all property and prevented from working -- they had become what we would call today typical "welfare cases," totally dependent on the meager financial support provided by the local branch of the Commissariat for Jewish affairs and the more generous donations made by those of their Jewish brethren who had access to money. With the help of these resources, a leadership body consisting of relocated and local Jews, and including father who was put in charge of security and legal affairs, transformed the Pleven Jewish school into the center of Jewish life, complete with a soup kitchen that provided two hot meals a day to every needy Jew, a makeshift synagogue, rooms for cultural events and community meetings, and -- of course a school, albeit smaller in size than the one that existed before.

The social environment in which Jewish newcomers and old timers alike led their lives in Pleven in the summer of 1943 was characterized by a surprising lack of hostility on the part of the

local Christian population. Most surprising was not the almost complete absence of anti-Semitism, for after all this had been for decades a nationwide phenomenon among Bulgarian non-Jews, but the fact that these people, who normally would be expected to obediently comply with government policies and directives, chose to reject the kind of behavior that the ruling cliques would have liked them to display toward the Jews. While the main motive for their benign treatment of a persecuted minority was of a humanitarian nature, the Christian residents of Pleven were also interested in taking advantage of the influx of refugees from Sofia in order to make money and do things that benefited the welfare of their city. At that juncture, such an attitude was a godsend to the Jewish community. It found practical expression in the partial lifting or non-enforcement of restrictions imposed by the local Commissariat for Jewish Affairs. Jews were counting their blessings, even though their overall situation had not substantially changed.

Death of a King

Suddewnly, however, a dramatic event occurred that exceeded in importance the recent improvements in our daily lives because of its uncertain impact on our ultimate fate. By mid-day on August 29, 1943, the country was awash with cryptic official announcements and

less reliable word-of-mouth accounts of the untimely and mysterious death of King Boris III only days after returning from a visit with Hitler in the latter's bunker headquarters in Prussia. Although heart failure was cited as the official cause of death, a number of foul-play scenarios have been circulating over the last six decades, including one that accuses the Nazis of pumping poison gas into the king's oxygen mask while flying back home from Germany. Because of lack of conclusive evidence, the scenarios have remained just that: imaginative but unsubstantiated reconstructions of an important historical event. One aspect of Boris III's death, however, is of unquestioned certainty, namely that it added to the chain of German defeats by depriving them of an ally they could continue to rely on in a region where their position was tenuous at best -- and that, at a time when they were still smarting from the Stalingrad debacle and were facing the threat of an Allied takeover of Italy.

Bulgarians reacted to the king's death with very strong emotions. Judging by the tremendous outpour of popular grief, especially during his funeral in Sofia which we saw in lengthy newsreels and other documentaries, the people of Bulgaria truly liked and loved their king. So did we, his Jewish subjects, despite our uncertainty as to the role he played in the introduction of anti-Jewish measures and, even more importantly, in the preparation of plans for our deportation to Poland.

A Shot in the Dark

The shock of King Boris's death wore off sooner than expected. And our family, being financially much better off than most other displaced Sofia Jews and enjoying the Pleven authorities' lax application of anti-Jewish laws, continued to lead, under the circumstances, an almost comfortable existence. But then, one night, something very scary happened. All five of us were sound asleep when suddenly, well after midnight, I heard a shot and the noise of a hard object hitting the wall next to my bed -- at a height barely a few centimeters from my pillow. Everybody, except Odette, jumped from their beds, agitated and confused. Father turned on the light and, within seconds, I discovered on the wall above my pillow a gaping hole that could have been made only by a bullet. Since the local Fascist police could not be expected to properly investigate an incident involving Jews, we decided to explore the facts and gather the evidence ourselves. Eventually, we managed to extract from the hole in the wall a short elongated missile which was identified by a knowledgeable neighbor as having been fired from an army-issue rifle. And after we learned from eyewitnesses in the neighborhood that, around the time we heard the shot, three or four young men, wearing the uniform of the Brannik Fascist youth movement, had walked past our house in a state of obvious inebriation, we no longer had any doubt that what had happened was the work of armed men bent on scaring or killing Jews. We were also convinced that my own life had been spared by

nothing short of a miracle.

A few days later, father decided to advance$Wthe date of his original arrangement with Sofie about vacating the room we occupied in her house and started looking for new quarters, preferably far from downtown Pleven and its small, but dangerous, band of Hitler-youth-type hooligans. To his great surprise, he discovered that some Christian people had been placing little advertisements offering rooms for rent on the Jewish School's main billboard. One of the advertisements led him to a brand new house in the rural outskirts of the city that was owned by a retired local lawyer and his twenty-year-old daughter. The proposed lease, which offered to place at our disposal, for an incredibly reasonable monthly rent, a separate-entrance section of the house, consisting of a bedroom, small living room, kitchen and bathroom, was signed on the spot.

We moved into our new home in September 1943 and lived there till the very end of our exile in Pleven. My initial reaction to our suburban abode was quite positive until I realized that it lacked toilet facilities and that we were expected to use instead a primitive Turkish-style latrine in the backyard -- a few meters away from the fenced-off sty in which the landlord's pig led its idiotically contented existence. To offset the presence of this repulsive animal, we took in a very cute, snow-white, stray kitten that instantly won my affection and became the only pet I have

ever had. Against the backdrop of a rather harmonious relationship with the landlord and his daughter, the new experience of suburban living was a satisfactory one for all four of us. Grandma Rachel, incidentally, was no longer staying with us, having moved to a small apartment on a residential street off the city's main square.

My "Righteous Gentile"

The pessimism I expressed in my letter to Uncle Narcisse as to whether Jewish teenagers would be allowed to attend classes during the coming school year turned out to be unjustified. Whatever reasons the local school board had to act contrary to the spirit of the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the fact is that kids like me **were** permitted to join, on an equal footing, their Christian peers in continuing their education. The "equal footing" did not extend, however, to the discriminatory yellow Star of David badge that we had to wear even in school.

The high school that I was assigned to was located in the downtown area, which meant that every day I had to walk quite a distance from our suburban home and back. Very soon, this walk became the most nerve-wrecking experience of my life as a student. At least once a week, and almost always at the same half-way spot,

two or three members of the local Fascist Youth, wearing their fear-inspiring uniforms, would suddenly appear from the opposite direction and head straight towards me. Without uttering a word, one of them would slap me on the face -- repeatedly and hard. At first, I tried to put up a fight and attempt to escape, but to no avail. My attackers were older and stronger than I and they were in no mood of letting go of their easy Jewish prey. So, instead of offering resistance, I adopted a strategy of "surrender for the sake of survival." I would walk by my tormentors, get my quota of head blows, and then continue walking to school as though nothing had happened. My face's bruises, scratches and bluish puffiness notwithstanding, the strategy was a success -- at least in terms of reducing the attacks' duration and ensuring that I would arrive on time for morning classes.

In view of the different forms of harassment to which my school mates subjected me from the moment of my arrival, one would have thought that I would not be so eager to get to school. But I was -- not only because I enjoyed the process of learning, but also because of the amazing fact that very often my teachers would risk their Fascist credentials and come out openly in my defense. Especially the woman who taught the German language, a language I had no choice but to study at the time. One day, after hearing some anti-Jewish remarks addressed to me in class and seeing how I was

physically harassed in the corridor, she took everyone by surprise when she transformed her lesson on 19th century German authors into an impassioned lecture against intolerance. Speaking of Heine, she asked:

$3 "Do you know that Heine was Jewish? And what does that mean? That a person can be a Jew and yet a good German, a great German poet and literary critic, just as we have Jews in this country who are poets and critics and scientists -- like the old gentleman, a famous mathematician, whom you can sometimes see in the park wearing a black wide-brimmed hat and a long black coat."

I will never forget this wonderful woman who supported me with such conviction and eloquence. In spite of her German education and long sojourn in Germany, she had remained totally uncontaminated by the Nazis' insane hatred for the Jews. On the contrary, she took open exception to it. She even exempted me from giving the Fascist salute at the beginning of her class. These salutes, with pupils jumping to their feet and extending one arm in an imitation Heil Hitler sign, were given to each instructor teaching a different subject upon entering the classroom. The salutes were accompanied (in the particular language taught by the teacher) by the following words: "For King and Country, We Are Ready to Die!"

"Enemy Planes Over Bulgaria"

Speaking of the German language, I remember clearly those frequent bulletins broadcast over national radio and street loudspeakers:

"Achtung, achtung," the pleasant German baritone voice would usually intone. " Luftwaffe meldung: Uber Bulgarien keine feindliche luftzeuge." ("Attention, attention, a Luftwaffe announcement: No enemy aircraft are flying over Bulgaria").

These bulletins were broadcast by the German Air Force unit in Sofia only when Allied aircraft had not penetrated the Bulgarian airspace. But whenever American or British planes were flying over Bulgaria on their return from bombing missions in Romania or on their one-time bombing attack on Sofia, the Luftwaffe kept completely silent. This system of "alert in reverse" was very puzzling to those of us who had paid attention to it. The existence of a Luftwaffe office in Sofia may sound strange considering that Bulgaria was never under actual German occupation. But it starts to make sense when one realizes that the Germans had to maintain a token force in Bulgaria in order to offer facilitative assistance, and ensure the safety of the troop reinforcements they were moving through Bulgarian territory on route to the Greek front. One has to assume that the Luftwaffe's failure to publicly announce the

presence of enemy aircraft in Bulgaria's skies was deliberate, and that it transmitted danger warnings in an exclusive and confidential manner to the German troops in transit, leaving it to the Bulgarian authorities to alert their citizens by the sounding of air-raid sirens.

By late 1943, the wail of sirens could be heard in Pleven at least once every day -- and that continued well into the summer of 1944. City residents were expected to head immediately to the nearest shelter and stay there until the all-clear signal. Most shelters were of a very primitive kind. In fact, they were nothing more than open trenches dug up in private gardens, front and back yards, clearings between buildings, public parks and unpaved streets. Our own shelter was also of the trench variety, dug up in the back yard not far from the pig sty. We dismissed it as a means of protection against aerial bombing not only because of its obvious vulnerability, but also because of its proximity to the malodorous "abode" of the young swine. We did use it, though, as storage space for a huge suitcase, equipped with special lock and wrapped in layers of masking tape, which contained such valuables as a bar of gold, the family jewels, important documents, and selected items of quality clothing. But where did we go to escape the potential bombardment from the air? Where else but to the vineyards, a twenty-minute walking distance from the last house of

our suburban neighborhood. Our reasoning was that the Allies would not waste their bombs by dropping them on unpopulated areas, an assessment with which the authorities not only agreed, but granted us permission to use the vineyards as shelters. Little did we all know that aircraft returning from bombing missions often drop their redundant ordnance on areas of no military importance. In our blissful ignorance, we made every day around noon the twenty-minute excursion to the vineyards, carrying blankets and little chairs as well as backpacks and shopping bags full of food and beverages. More often than not, we were escorted from above by low-flying and slow-moving "flying fortresses" which made their way through Bulgaria's airspace confident that they will not come under antiaircraft fire. It was a great sight to behold, a sight that filled our hearts with conflicting feelings: on the one hand -- love and pride for our potential liberators, and on the other -- fear of possible attack.

With time, these daily escapes from air raids, to which we were alerted but which never actually occurred, turned into a series of routine field trips. The closest we got to an incident involving an "enemy" plane was the crash of a disabled American bomber, which in all probability had been hit by German air defense batteries in Romania and tried to make an emergency landing in Bulgaria. The plane's crew, as we learned on the following day, had parachuted to

safety and had been promptly apprehended by Bulgarian military police. Since the crash site was at a distance of only three kilometers from our vineyard shelter, the children in our group decided to go there and see for themselves what a military aircraft looked like. Well, we got the shock of our lives when we set eyes on the huge, heavily damaged machine. It looked like a wounded prehistoric bird. As we, children, watched in awe from a distance, some young and not-so-young men were vandalizing the plane, carving pieces out of its tires to use them as soles for their shoes or sawing off chunks of its windows' plexiglass (a material never seen before in Bulgaria) for no apparent practical use. The Jews among us felt a great deal of joyful admiration for this amazing product of American technology, but at the same time we felt a little sad for the damage it had suffered and its subsequent "desecration" by Bulgarian vandals. Our sadness, however, was tempered by the thought that we could have been the victims of this aircraft's "friendly fire" had it been on a bombing mission over Pleven.

This thought acquired greater relevance when, in February 1944, a formation of American bombers conducted a fierce, night-time attack on Sofia, dropping hundreds of regular and incendiary bombs on a poorly defended city. The fires set off by the bombs were fanned by the strong winter winds to such a degree that no attempts

were made to contain them. An indication of the fires' strength and scope was the fact that the sky had a reddish glow as far away as Pleven. If we had not been expelled from Sofia, we would have suffered, on an equal footing with the Christian residents of the capital, the destruction, injury or death that was visited on them. But while we did escape death, the destruction of property in Sofia affected our family as well, and very substantially at that. A two-story house owned by my father, which had been the home of Aunt Lisa and her family until their relocation to Pleven, was levelled to the ground by an American bomb, burying under the debris a small safe containing the one million leva in cash that father thought he could safely hide from the Fascists. When the safe was finally recovered after the war, the bills turned out to be badly damaged. The irony, however, was that even if the paper money had been in perfect condition, it would have been impossible to exchange it for the new currency introduced by the Fascist regime in the last months of its rule. So much for dad's wisdom in trying to preserve a substantial part of his wealth by hiding it in the form of paper bills.

The Turning Point

There is no evidence that the aerial bombardment of Sofia

played a crucial role in Bulgaria's emerging tendency to distance itself from Nazi Germany, but it must have been a$Ycontributing factor. With Bulgarian politicians growing increasingly aware of the Third Reich's inevitable defeat at the hands of the unquestionably superior Allied forces, new governments came to power almost every other month, and each successive cabinet was less inclined to remain in the camp of the Axis and more interested in signing a separate peace with the Allies.

The question of continuing the persecution of Jews receded to the bottom of the government's agenda, and by the end of May 1944 a cabinet headed by the well-known moderate, Ivan Bagryanov, was eagerly expected by Jews and non-Jews alike to proclaim a departure from Fascist policies. And indeed, upon taking office on May 24, a year to the day since the protests (by Jews and Church leaders against the expulsion from Sofia, Prime Minister Bagryanov did address the nation by radio. His speech, while far from announcing a drastic break with the past, contained, nevertheless, broad hints that his government would be more moderate and conciliatory to the West. I remember how anxiously we, the Jews living in Pleven, awaited Bagryanov's address, advance word of which had apparently been leaked by his close associates. Since the restriction on listening to radio broadcasts had ceased to be enforced despite the continuing ban on possession of radio sets, Jews were busy making

arrangements with Christian friends and acquaintances to listen, in the latter's homes, to the prime minister's speech. Our own access to a radio set was ensured when, for the first time since we moved into a section of their house, our landlords invited us to visit with them. We listened with great interest and excitement, and -- notwithstanding the fact that Bagryanov made no direct reference to the situation of the Jews -- my parents greeted his address as a major turning point in the policies of the Bulgarian government. Our hosts were much less enthusiastic but managed to muster some wan smiles for our sake. Jewish reaction to the speech, which was universally one of relief and hope, was vindicated a few days later when the prime minister and his minister of war made contact with several prominent Jewish leaders, assuring them that under their regime Jewish rights would be fully restored, although not immediately because of the necessity to move cautiously vis-a-vis the Germans. Less than two months after these assurances were given, the Bagryanov government made good on its pledge and abrogated the infamous Law for the Protection of the Nation and a later decree expanding the scope of that law as well as other minor and supplementary legislative measures. We were now allowed the same freedom of travel as Christians, the same civil and political rights. We no longer had to wear the yellow Star of David badges, and we could use whatever names we chose instead of the Jewish-sounding names given to us by the now-defunct Commissariat

for Jewish Affairs. Jewish organizations, institutions and activities were revived. The special taxes imposed on us were abolished. The government also promised to return confiscated Jewish property and grant Jews the same economic freedom that non-Jews enjoyed. We could clearly see now the approaching end of our plight as victims of persecution.

This substantial change in Bulgarian policy was confirmed in advance of its official announcement to Ira Hirschmann, a special envoy to the Balkans of President Roosevelt's War Refugee Board, who asked the Bulgarian ambassador in Ankara what he could do on behalf of Bulgarian Jews. After conferring with Sofia, the ambassador responded as follows:

"There is no doubt that the new Bulgarian government profoundly regrets all the anti-Jewish measures taken by our country and that it does not in the least approve these measures.

"I have the impression that the government intends to abolish the present laws regarding the Jews at an opportune moment. However, for the present it has firmly decided to do away with arbitrary methods in the application of these laws, as well as with all restrictive measures not provided by such laws."

We learned about this exchange in late 1944 from the French-

speaking American representative in the Allied Control Commission in Sofia, who used to have frequent consultations with father on legal and political matters.

It was an irony of fate, that Ivan Bagryanov, this architect of THE GREAT CHANGE, was removed from power by the Regency Council, which had been ruling the country since the death of King Boris III on behalf of his infant son Simeon, exactly one week before the occupation of Bulgaria by Russian troops and the end of Fascist rule. In spite of his many positive actions, Bagrayanov was considered insufficiently acceptable to the Allies and had to step down in favor of Konstantin Muraviev, a politician with strong pro-Western credentials.

September 9, 1944

This morning I awoke feeling strangely agitated. To relieve the anxiety, I decided to take a walk -- not a short one around the neighborhood, but a long jog all the way to the downtown Central Square. When I got to the square, I was surprised to find it completely empty of pedestrians and vehicles. There was an eerie silence broken suddenly by the noise of heavy boots. Startled, I turned and saw a young man, carrying a rifle, coming toward me from

the direction of a side street. When he drew nearer, the bearded man shouted:

"Hello, comrade! Happy holiday to you." Confused, I mumbled in response: "Hello. But what kind of holiday are you talking about?" "Well," said the stranger with a smile, "today is liberationday, and I am one of the liberators, a partisan just descended from the hills."

"God," I thought to myself, "I am talking to one of those tough guys sought by police as dangerous terrorists."

As if reading my thoughts, the young man tried to reassure me: "Don't be afraid, I am Jewish like you -- I've seen you with your father, that lawyer Yasharoff, in the Jewish School. And now, as a Jew, you are going to do me a favor. You'll join me and a few other partisans in our mission of arresting Fascist officials."

With this, he threw the rifle over his shoulder and approached a group of partisans who had come to the square while we were talking. Still in shock from this unexpected turn of events, I just waited for my "recruiter" to take me on his rounds, not even thinking of running away, which I could have easily done during his huddle with the newly arrived comrades. Finally, he turned to me

and motioned me to follow him.

Ten minutes later we were knocking on the door of what turned out to be the house of Pleven's chief of police. I knew from newspaper and word-of-mouth accounts that he had the reputation of an extremely tough cop who often boasted about the "scorched-earth" tactics$`he used against partisan hideouts and the "unusually painful" torture methods to which his underlings subjected captured members of the underground. The man who opened the door bore no resemblance to the bloodthirsty policeman he was reputed to be. A short, bespectacled man of fragile build, his face white as a sheet and his body shaking like a leaf, he was joined at the door by his wife and daughter. The arrival of the young partisan had taken them completely by surprise. They could not believe that the Fascists were so suddenly removed from power. My "recruiter" pushed the three of them inside the house and instructed me to conduct thorough body searches. As I went about this totally unusual task, I was more frightened and confused than the police chief himself, especially when I removed from its holster his large, German-made pistol. Fright was replaced by intense embarrassment when I proceeded to frisk the police chief's wife and daughter. When he saw me hesitate to run my hands over certain parts of their bodies, the partisan shouted:

" I want you to search every single centimeter." I was

mortified, sick of the whole thing. I had had enough. The question was: how to get out of this unwelcome assignment? Suddenly, I remembered that most houses of this type had a second entrance through the back yard. I asked the partisan for permission to go to the bathroom and he readily granted it. When I got to the kitchen, I immediately saw the back door and flew out of the house with the speed of an Olympic runner. I ran like crazy all the way to the Jewish School, hoping to avoid any more encounters with the partisans.

But this was not to be. Just as I was approaching the school, I saw from a short distance that a few armed partisans were standing guard at the front gate. I stopped in my tracks and hid behind a tree so I could see what was going on. A few minutes later, the five or six members of the Jewish Community Council, including my father, were marched out at gun point by a Jewish man, a well-known Communist, also active in Jewish affairs, who was not a partisan himself but obviously connected with the anti-Fascist resistance. While ordering his captives to board a waiting military truck, he was shouting that they were being arrested as enemies of the people and collaborators with the Fascists. I felt crushed and helpless and did not know what to do. Should I rush home and tell mother what had happened? But she could do nothing to help father either. I decided instead to talk to whomever was left at the

school and find out if something was being done to obtain the release of the Council members. I was told by two low-level functionaries that telephone calls had been placed to partisan headquarters in Sofia and to members of the new Fatherland Front government that was to assume power soon. They also suggested that I wait in their office so I could have first-hand news on developments. About two hours later, the office door opened and in walked my father and the other Council members who had been arrested with him. They looked exhausted and slightly dishevelled, but visibly relieved. Their release was apparently secured by an angry phone call from a non-Communist member of the Fatherland Front who scolded his Pleven comrades for acting against Jews at a time when the new authorities were desperately trying to earn the confidence of the Allies, including the Soviet Union, and make them end the state of war against Bulgaria. After awhile, in an unusual gesture, father hugged me, put his arm around my shoulder and led me out of the room, eager to go home. While walking to our suburban neighborhood, I chose not to disturb the new-found harmony with father by telling him about the bizarre events in which I got involved in the morning. When we got home, the radio -- now controlled by the partisans -- was announcing the killing of the police chief, his wife and daughter "while attempting to escape arrest." What a dirty lie, I thought to myself. They were obviously executed in their own house without benefit of investigation and

trial. Notwithstanding my hatred for that family, I almost threw up a the news of their brutal assassination at the hands of those who were supposed to be ushering in a new era of lawful and humane behavior.

After hearing father's account of his arrest and release, Mother reacted with initial bewilderment and distress, which quickly gave way to a mood of joy and thanksgiving. By early evening, the shock and surprise caused by the partisan takeover of the local government had worn off and replaced by a not-so-happy expectation of the folowing morning's scheduled arrival of Russian troops. While the four of us were visiting friends that evening, I remember father urging everybody to hide their valuables because the impoverished Russians would go on a rampage as soon as they settled down as an occupying force.

The Russians Are Coming

Early on September 10, the local radio station announced that the first echelon of Soviet troops would be arriving in Pleven by train around 9 a.m. While my parents were completely uninterested in welcoming the Russians, I -- like many other Jewish and non-Jewish children -- decided to go to the railway station to greet the soldiers. By the time I got there, a large crowd had gathered

on the platform anxious to see members of the military force that had defeated the Nazis at Stalingrad, chased them out of Soviet territory, and was now pursuing them in their retreat from eastern and central Europe.

Loud applause greeted the appearance of the first open cars carrying tanks, artillery pieces and -- perched on them -- smiling young soldiers, mostly men but also quite a few women. When the train ground to a halt, the crowd began bombarding the soldiers with flowers and candy. Very pleased, the Russians sought to shake hands and exchange greetings with people on the platform. There was no communication problem in spite of the soldiers addressing those who had come to welcome them in Russian and getting responses in Bulgarian -- after all, the two Slavic languages were pretty similar to each other. Some of the Russians even helped children and young girls climb atop the tanks and cannons and then proceeded to hug and kiss them. These military men and women, dressed in shabby uniforms and in urgent need of a hot bath, impressed me as being very pleasant and friendly. I congratulated myself for coming to the railway station because it would have been a pity to miss the arrival of the Russians. While those of us who welcomed the arriving Soviet troops at the train station did so out of pure admiration, the general public -- aware of the Russians' dual role as liberators and occupiers -- greeted them with a mixture of joy

and apprehension. The fear was prompted by the soldiers' assumed Communist ideology and the rejoicing was due to residual gratitude for Russia's decisive role in the 1878 liberation of Bulgaria from five centuries of Turkish rule. Most Jews, who had been silent supporters during the war of the anti-Axis alliance's Anglo-Saxon partners, were deeply disappointed that their liberators were not British or American soldiers.

My own initial enthusiasm about the Soviet forces suffered an eye-opening blow a few days after their arrival. Passing through the downtown area, I was stopped by an obese Russian female soldier, who was directing traffic. She ordered me to give her my watch. Luckily, I did not own a time piece, and she waved me off with one of the most obscene curses in the Russian language. I recognized the curse because Bulgarians also used it when they felt the need to swear in a particularly nasty way. At dinner that evening, father told me that he had heard of tens of instances, similar to mine, in which Russian soldiers had stopped people on the street and robbed them of their cameras, watches, earrings and other valuable objects. "Remember the warning I gave all of you on the eve of their arrival?," said father at the end of his recitation of Soviet misdeeds, visibly proud of his correct prediction.

Return to Sofia

At the end of September, my parents received notice that ownership of our house in Sofia would be officially restored to us n the first week of October and that we could move in any time after that. Since the house where Aunt Lisa and her family used to live had been destroyed during the Allied bombing earlier in the year, father placed at their disposal the third-floor apartment of our house at 24 Benkovska Street while we moved into our old, second-floor flat that had been vacated by the Balsamov couple. In fact, as we learned from newspaper accounts a few days later, they had hijacked a small, Bulgarian passenger plane while on a routine domestic flight, and fled to Turkey. They had left behind such an ungodly mess that it took an enormous amount of cleaning and repair work in order to make it livable again. Our major problem, however, was the mountain of rubble that covered most of our front yard. Hit by a bomb during the Allied air raid, our neighbors' house had collapsed in its entirety onto the elegant gazebo, lacquered lawn and beautiful flower beds of our spacious front yard, making it difficult to open the front gate and walk the considerable distance to the building's only entrance. Until the municipality removed part of the rubble, we had to climb over mounds of debris in order to get home. Most of our furniture stored at the homes of different Christian friends had survived intact, except for my parents'

expensive, stylish, French-manufactured bedroom set, which was partly destroyed in Mr. Minkovsky's bomb-damaged apartment.

My own main preoccupation during those first days of our return to Sofia was to go back to school. Because of the historic changes set in motion on September 9, 1944, the start of the school year was postponed by two months, which gave me a chance not only to take advantage of late registration, but also to begin my high-school education without missing any classes. I was looking forward to resuming my studies without having to wear the yellow Star of David badge and without fearing anti-Semitic harassment. I never stopped to think that the student body at the First Boys' High School would probably include many of my previous tormentors, especially those who were members of Fascist youth movements. And indeed, on the first day of school I saw many of those familiar faces. They avoided looking at me, and those who did tried to communicate a desire for reconciliation stemming from their erroneous conviction that as presumed supporters of our liberators, the Communists, we Jews were now in power.

The falsehood of the idea that -- because of their supposed alliance with the Communists -- the Jews had become "untouchable" was proved very early in the school year by the attitude of a few teachers known for their impeccable Communist credentials.

Prominent among them was our teacher of philosophy, who was also responsible for monitoring and evaluating our behavior. He was a short, pudgy man, with a military-type crew cut, who spoke with the distinct accent of a peasant and hated urban types like me and my four Jewish classmates. A proud Communist, he made no attempt to hide his political affiliation but neither did he try to conceal his extreme anti-Semitism. He began to harass the five of us by criticizing the clothes we wore. At that time, most teenagers copied the hair style and clothing of young actors in the American movies that were now allowed to be imported and shown in theaters. That meant long hair, longer-than-usual jackets, tight trousers and felt hats. This kind of appearance was seen as an unmistakable sign of anti-Communism, and the persons exhibiting it were pejoratively called "swings" after the popular American dance of the immediate postwar era. It was this connection to "American decadence," a concept often invoked by the new Bulgarian government in parroting its Soviet masters' anti-U.S. policy in the aftermath of World War II, that irked our philosophy teacher most. Instead of treating the five of us as the Jewish victims of Fascism whom the Communists were supposed to have fought for and liberated, he branded us as "enemies of the people." While his biting remarks about our clothing focused in class on what we wore in school, his almost apoplectic ire was provoked by the felt hats he saw us wearing one evening coming out of a movie theater. How on earth he happened to

be there, I will never know. But he was there, and he spotted us instantly. Shouting at the top of his lungs, he attracted the puzzled attention of the people who had just filed out of the theater. When he calmed down a little, he told us in an icy tone of voice that he was going to lower our behavior grade by one point, a punishment that -- within the Bulgarian school system of the time -- was the equivalent of a demerit given to U.S.
soldiers for breach of discipline. This threat did scare us a bit, but we were more inclined to dismiss it, together with the rest of his tirade, as the maniacal ranting of a primitive and deranged person. On the following morning, however, we were forced to take him more seriously when he showed us the letter he was sending the principal requesting that our excellent behavior rating be downgraded. That ignominy remained in our records throughout the 1944-45 school year and the summer vacation. But our nightmare ended at the beginning of the 1945-46 school year, when a new philosophy teacher and conduct supervisor was assigned to our class. Within a month, our behavior grades were restored to the level of "excellent." By that time, whatever little sympathy my Jeiwsh school mates and I had for the Communists had completely evaporated.

CHAPTER 4: LIFE UNDER COMMUNISM

While the Soviet occupying forces would have loved to install the Bulgarian Communist Party as the exclusive ruler of the kingdom after the overthrow of the Fascists, the minuscule size of that party forced them to agree to the formation of the wide government coalition known as the Fatherland Front (FF), which included all existing anti-Fascist groupings. They did succeed, though, to ensure that the Communists played a dominant role in the new government despite their numerical weakness. One of the first acts of the FF coalition was to arrest the members and high officials of the last and previous Fascist governments, all Fascist-era members of parliament, the advisors and staff of the late King Boris III as well as his brother Kyril and the other two regents who governed on behalf of the infant King Simeon, and many other mid- and low-level functionaries, including the director and personnel of the infamous Commissariat for Jewish Affairs. The regency council was replaced with a new one, consisting of one Communist, one independent and one representative of a centrist party.

The Communist-dominated authorities' next step was to bring the arrested members of the "ancien regime" to trial before hastily instituted "People's Courts." Among the parliamentarians tried by these kangaroo courts was Dimitar Peshev, the man whose courageous intervention in March 1943 prevented the deportation of Bulgarian

Jews to the Nazi extermination camps in Poland. He was regarded by the FF, and especially by the Communists, as one of the architects of the Fascist government's programs. That he aided the Jews in their hour of need was irrelevant. In fact, one of the "People's Courts" ended up ordering the execution of a former parliamentarian who had consistently spoken up for the Jews in the National Assembly. Yet it was Peshev's protest action against sending the Jews to their deaths that indirectly helped save his life in 1945. He himself was so sure his successful intervention against the deportation of Jews would work in his favor with the new authorities that when he was arrested on November 14, 1944, he took leave of his family in very high spirits, assuring them of his return "within a couple of days." As it happened, he rejoined his loved ones over two years later -- after facing possible capital punishment and ending up with a commuted sentence of fifteen years in prison.

In spite of the attenuating circumstances of his opposition to the Filov government on the Jewish and other questions, Peshev soon discovered that he was going to be tried together with all Fascist parliamentarians, ministers and top government officials, including Prince Kyril in his capacity as former regent. That meant that if found guilty, he could be sentenced to death. To defend himself, Peshev needed a good lawyer. The People's Court was ready to

provide him with a court-appointed Jewish counsel to be selected jointly by his family and the Sofia lodge of B'nei B'rith. The first choice, a non-Communist lawyer called Lidgi, asked to be excused after one month on the job supposedly because of ill health, but in actuality because of fear that the new authorities would punish him for defending a Fascist. No matter that Lidgi and all of his fellow Jews owed their lives to that Fascist! The second choice, Mevorakh, a card-carrying Communist, was understandably reluctant to accept a politically dangerous assignment and declined the appointment. The recruiters then approached Norbert's father, Joseph Yasharoff, the third member of the Jewish "troika" of first-rate lawyers, which included Lidgi and Mevorakh. Yasharoff accepted the assignment without a minute's hesitation. "I considered it a privilege to assume Peshev's legal defense. For a Jew like me that was an unexpected opportunity to show some gratitude," said Norbert's father years after the trial.

Undaunted by the prospect of incurring the displeasure of the Communists, Yasharoff was determined to save his client's life despite the court's lack of objectivity and its unconcealed tendency to apply the ideology and "values" of the new government in judging the leaders of the old regime. With the help of Jewish and non-Jewish witnesses, he recreated in the courtroom Peshev's courageous stand in the National Assembly against the planned

deportation of Bulgarian Jewry. Yasharoff, however, knew that Peshev's decisive role in the rescue of the Jews was not enough of an extenuating circumstance for the People's Court. He, therefore, played the trump card he had kept close to his chest throughout the trial, namely the fact that in 1936, in his capacity as Minister of Justice, Peshev had refused to sign the execution order for General Damyan Velchev, forcing the king to commute his sentence. After the September 1944 coup d'etat, the same Velchev became a leading figure in the Fatherland Front Government, and Yasharoff's subtle message to the court was that, if not for his client, the prominent member of the new regime would have died nine years before his present ascension to power. Historians are divided on the question of which of the two arguments prevailed in the minds of the judges, but the fact remains that the Court spared Peshev's life, sentencing him to fifteen years in prison. Twenty of his forty three parliamentary supporters who had joined his protest action in the National Assembly against the deportation of Jews were sentenced to death. A total of 2,800 top, mid-level and low-level officials of the previous regime were sentenced to death by people's courts around the country and executed by firing squad -- most of them on the same day their sentences were pronounced. And while people's courts were still in session, another 18,000 people living in villages and small towns were executed without trial by former partisans in the name of "people's justice."

A year and a half later, Peshev was released from jail thanks to the intervention of an old school mate of his from Kyustendil, who was now in charge of the Communist cell in the Sofia neighborhood in which both of them lived. [Peshev lived with his sister in her apartment because the authorities had confiscated his.] In that capacity, the friend saved Peshev from the fate of most released prisoners, namely their immediate dispatch to concentration camps. Freed from jail, but imprisoned by his status as an outcast, Peshev began to lead an existence surpassing in its misery the life he had led after his censure at the National Assembly. Surviving a heart attack only four months after his release from prison, he found himself confronting abject poverty -- with no right to work, with no income whatsoever, with no property to sell. He depended entirely for his financial survival on his sister and her modest salary as a pharmacy assistant, a terrible blow to his pride and dignity.

As a convict, a "Fascist," an "enemy of the people," Peshev went into complete seclusion in order to protect the members of his family from suffering because of his political past, a noble but not so effective an effort. He spent his days reading between the lines of newspaper accounts and learning that the Communists were gradually depriving their coalition partners of any real power and inexorably marching toward complete control of the government.

Slowly, the depressing circumstances of his life brought about a deep psychological change in Peshev. Previously tough, self-confident, ready to take any risks in the pursuit of causes he believed in, he became soft, mild-mannered, sentimental and devoid of any hostility to the outside world, including his Communist tormentors. Added to his apathy was an almost paralyzing fear, the same fear that had gripped the whole country in anticipation of what the Communists would do next. He was forgotten in his plight even by the Jews he had saved from deportation. Being mostly artisans and small businessmen, they watched with alarm as the Communists decreed restriction upon restriction on private initiative. Preoccupation with their own economic survival made them oblivious to the fate of their savior. And when Communist policies, including the particularly harsh harassment on the part of Jewish Communists, drove them to desperation, Bulgarian Jews began emigrating to Palestine. Peshev was thus being deprived of his only "constituency."

The Fatherland Front's position on Zionism and the eventual establishment of a Jewish State was ambivalent: on the one hand, as part of the Soviet bloc's opposition to Western imperialism, it supported the Zionist stance against the British presence in Palestine; on the other hand, individual government leaders and the press organs of the Communist Party, including its venomous Jewish

weekly, lost no opportunity to denounce Zionists as "reactionary nationalists and chauvinists."

As small groups of Jews continued to leave Bulgaria in the hope of entering Palestine despite the British ban on immigration, the Communists were working feverishly to gain complete domination of the Fatherland Front. Almost on a daily basis, non-Communist parliamentarians disappeared from their homes -- never to be seen again (presumably killed in some isolated locations). Most government ministers from non-Communist parties were fired from their jobs, and in September 1946 a plebescite abolished the monarchy and established a republic. The ten-year-old King Simeon II and his mother Queen Joanna were expelled from the country and, after spending time in Egypt and other hospitable nations, finally settled in Spain. [King Simeon II's political party won the 2001 elections in Bulgaria and he is currently serving as prime minister of that country -- author's note].

In May 1948, the State of Israel was proclaimed and Bulgaria was among the first Soviet satellites to follow Moscow's lead and extend recognition to the new nation. This diplomatic gesture was followed almost immediately by a government decree granting Jews the right of free emigration to Israel, an action whose real motives have never been fully explained. Within a period of six

months, forty-five thousand Bulgarian Jews took advantage of this "open-gates" policy and left for the Jewish state, moving into various areas of Israel which had been vacated by the Palestinian Arabs.

Father Defends Our Savior

It was amazing how fast father bounced back to being the highly successful lawyer he was before the Fascists banned him from practicing law. Only weeks after our return from exile in Pleven, his renewed practice was attracting tens of Jewish clients to our apartment where his large study was converted into an office. All of his clients were Jews returning from forced resettlement in the provinces who needed help in resolving such problems related to the return of confiscated real estate as dwellings that were still occupied by the people who had moved in with the permission of the Fascist Government or dwellings that were registered, under the previous regime, as the legal property of the non-Jews who had moved in when their Jewish owners were forced to vacate them. This professional bonanza, which could have continued for at least two more years, came to an abrupt end in early 1945 when father agreed to defend, before the so-called People's Court, Dimitar Peshev, the gallant Vice President of the Fascist-era National Assembly, whose

daring intervention prevented the deportation of Bulgarian Jewry to the Nazi extermination camps.

Defending Peshev before the Communist-dominated court was a most demanding, complex and time-consuming task. Since father no longer had a partner or any other assistant, he desperately needed someone who could help him with the historical research and the editing of his opening and summation speeches. Above all, that person had to be totally reliable in terms of preserving the secrecy of defense-strategy details. To my utmost delight, father chose me as the right candidate for the job. He knew that I was a grade-A student in history, language and literature, and was confident of my ability -- despite my very young age -- to carry out my tasks to his full satisfaction. To give me a sense of what my work was supposed to help achieve, he started taking me to the Palace of Justice where the trial of Peshev and all other top officials of the pro-Nazi Bulgarian governments was being held.

Although I had very little sympathy for most of the defendants, I could not help feeling sorry for some of them -- for they looked so haggard, abnormally pale, and helpless, holding their trousers, unsupported by belts or suspenders, with their hands to prevent them from sliding down their emaciated bodies. I was shocked by the harshness with which both prosecutors and judges treated the

accused. I also felt sorry and frightened for father, who looked so lonely and beleaguered amid this crowd of legal vultures who wished him only one thing: to fail in his defense of Peshev.

I was in the courtroom on the day father was scheduled to present his summation. Departing often from the prepared text I had so meticulously edited, father delivered one of his most eloquent and rousing orations. He stressed the courage displayed by Peshev in voicing from the rostrum of the National Assembly his own firm opposition, and that of about forty other members of the parliamentary majority who supported him, against the anti-Jewish policy of the Bulgarian government. He pointed out that Peshev's actions demonstrated to Nazi Germany's envoys how unpopular among Bulgarian politicians was the idea of deporting the native Jewish population to the death camps in Poland. He also told the People's Court that Peshev's bold efforts had greatly contributed to the "political decriminalization of Bulgaria on the Jewish question and to its acquittal on one major count in the court of world opinion." At the end, father played the trump card he had so zealously kept secret throughout the court proceedings: the documentary evidence of Peshev's risky refusal in the not-so-distant past to sign, in his capacity as Justice Minister, the execution order for a member of the current Fatherland Front government, thus forcing the commutation of that man's death sentence.

At the end of the summation, the audience burst into loud applause and some of the defendants rose to their feet -- a demonstration so defiantly violating trial procedure that the presiding judge was forced to declare a brief recess. Father was beaming with joy when I approached him with effusive congratulations outside the courtroom. He knew -- even before sentence was pronounced -- that Peshev's life had been saved. Indeed, while most of the other defendants were sentenced to death, Peshev was given the comparatively light sentence of 15 years in prison of which he spent only two years in jail, followed by a 30-year existence as a total pariah.

Criticism, Self-Criticism and Other Forms of Oppression

For a time, especially during the Peshev trial, I had become largely oblivious to the outside world, especially the political world of which I had been a keen observer since the age of nine. But this state of escapism did not last long. Communist propaganda in the schools, in the work place, in the newspapers, in the movies, on the radio and in any other public place or medium, suddenly reached such a high pitch that it was impossible to ignore it. Of greatest importance to me was the propaganda line against Zionism. Daily, Bulgarian newspapers and radio would fulminate against Zionism as a colonialist ideology striving to subjugate the

Arab population of Palestine. Those attacks had a distinct anti-Semitic overtone, the implication being that Jewish supporters of Zionism were automatically enemies of the new regime. But while the official propaganda machine was spewing venomous anti-Zionist rhetoric, the government did nothing to prevent Zionist organizations from conducting their activities and expanding their membership to the point of including, within a very short time, the majority of Bulgarian Jews. Notwithstanding that, the vitriol of official propaganda was a very disconcerting ingredient of our daily lives.

Even more disconcerting were the Communist-imposed sessions of criticism and self-criticism in which all citizens, without exception, were forced to participate at the neighborhood level. Like everybody else, I started attending the meetings in my own residential area, an experience that I can describe only as Kafkaesque. Presided over by a grim-faced young woman who looked every bit the fanatical Communist activist that she was, the proceedings resembled a ritual of collective confession -- its fear-induced solemnity matched only by the unintended levity of its grotesqueness. The presiding "commissar" would call out people's names, they would stand up and in halting voices criticize some neighbor or other for some petty violation of community rules. Following that, they would start criticizing themselves -- mostly for not being vigilant enough with regard to "enemies of the

people" and for not promoting energetically enough the ideology of the "people's government." By the time my name was called out, I had become so disgusted with the whole thing that I let the adrenalin racing in my blood overcome my better judgement and began criticizing the media campaign against Zionism. I pointed out that the Jewish people, having suffered in exile 2,000 years of humiliations, restrictions, persecutions and, most recently, mass extermination, deserved to return to their historical homeland and create their own state. It was disgraceful, I said for Bulgaria -- which had subjected its Jewish citizens to harsh persecutions during World War II and yet saved its honor by preventing their deportation to the Nazi death camps -- to wage such a vicious war of words against the Jewish movement for national revival while supporting such movements in countries living under colonial rule. The "commissar" was visibly displeased with my little speech and asked me to move on to self-criticism. My reckless defiance still dominating my mood, I declared that I had nothing to say and sat down in a demonstrative way. The "commissar" gave me a menacing look, but chose not to subject me to a public reprimand. A few minutes later, I left the meeting feeling very proud of myself -- still not realizing how dangerously foolish I had been. When it finally dawned on me what I had done, I became seriously worried as to what the comrades' reaction would be. For a few weeks nothing happened, but then I received a letter from the "commissar," castigating me for my "Fascist" behavior and ordering me to stay

away from future meetings. No other action was taken against me, and it was years before I realized why. The scales of the Communists' schizophrenic policy toward Zionism had finally been tipped in favor of support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine which, they expected, would become a bulwark against imperialism.

With every passing day, life was becoming more and more drab, austere, joyless and oppressive. Complete isolation from the West deprived us of the movies, books, magazines, visiting performers, and quality clothing and cosmetics items that had brought pleasure, thrills and color to our daily lives. Foodstuffs were in even shorter supply than during the war and the lines in front of stores were longer than ever. The only publications and films (primarily Soviet) that we had access to were either boring or depressing.

In my family, as well as in most other Jewish families, the desire to leave Communist Bulgaria was getting stronger by the day. Our emotional bond with the country in which we were born was finally and irreparably being broken.

The Involuntary Volunteer

Trying to fashion its policies as completely as possible after the Soviet model, Bulgaria's Communist-dominated government lost no

time in introducing a favorite brainchild of the Kremlin: the institution of volunteer labor brigades. Under the guise of voluntarism, workers of all kinds from all sectors of the economy were half-forced, half-induced to supply the unpaid labor needed by the ruling clique for pet projects outside the framework of five-year plans. Members of the general work force felt constrained to join the brigades because of the implied threat of being blacklisted as hostile to the regime, but many of them volunteered because of such inducements as special commendations, better prospects for promotion, and extra rations of meat, bread, sugar and cooking oil.

As for young people, just out of high school and still unemployed, the only inducement to volunteer for the labor brigades was the so-called Certificate of Service that promised preferential treatment in applying for admission to the overcrowded institutions of higher learning. Since at that point, the summer of 1947, I was far from sure that we would be allowed to emigrate to Palestine, I had to consider all possibilities concerning my future, and one of them was to get a college education in Bulgaria. Knowing that I stood no chance of being admitted to a university unless I could produce a document certifying voluntary participation in a labor brigade, I registered, just before my high school graduation, for service with a unit organized by my school. Expecting the worst, my main consolation was that many of my

schoolmates registered too.

Arrival at the brigade's campsite was a truly depressing experience. Row after row of drab-looking barracks gave one the feeling of entering a typical concentration camp. The only redeeming feature of this desolate place were the wooded hills that surrounded it at a distance of about two kilometers. After disembarking from the long line of buses that had brought them to this isolated location in the middle of nowhere, the 200 or so young male and female "volunteers" were ordered to stand at attention in military-style columns in order to receive their first instructions. The brigade's commander, a man in his early thirties, began by stating the obvious -- that men and women would live in separate quarters. He used the opportunity, moreover, to issue a stern warning against any amorous activity -- be it heterosexual or homosexual. The latter, of course, was considered a criminal offence by the Communists, the presumed champions of free love. The commander's second announcement was about "political education," another ritual created by the high priests of Communist AgitProp (the Agitation and Propaganda department of the Politburo responsible for the nationwide campaign of indoctrinating the Bulgarian people in the teachings of Marxism-Leninism). We were told that every day before breakfast, at 5 a.m., we would gather on the parade ground to hear a lecture by one of the five "cultural-educational officers" attached to the brigade. We were so shocked

by this crudely political addition to our daily schedule that one could hear a collective gasp from the assembled "volunteers." The next announcement was about the "creative task" of our brigade. We had been chosen, we were informed, to carry ou the enviable duty of building the first Bulgarian Children's Town -- patterned after Father Flanagan's Boys Town in Nebraska, but in contrast to it designed to accommodate not only boys, but also girls, and be open to children of all backgrounds, not just delinquents. "Housing arrangements" were the last items on the commander's list of instructions. The four-room barracks would house 24 persons, six per room, and our camp uniforms would be ready for pickup on the beds, he said, a mysterious smirk on his face. We were instructed to march in groups of 24 persons, in the order in which we were standing, into the barracks until all of them were fully occupied.

Entering the barracks was a surreal experience. The so-called rooms turned out to be 10-by-10-foot cubicles without beds or bunks -- just one elevated board on which six unfortunate "volunteers" were supposed to sleep next to each other like the crowded "occupants" of a tin of sardines. There was no mattress on the board -- only three nondescript blankets and six equally shabby pillows minus pillow cases. After inspecting our little inferno and changing into the camp uniforms that transformed us into very close approximations of Auschwitz inmates, we were directed to go to our open-air dining area (a patch of barren land with long, parallel

rows of crudely assembled wooden tables and unstable-looking folding chairs) for an early supper. I had barely taken my seat, when a pretty young woman, who introduced herself as Nadezhda, one of the five "cultural-educational officers," informed me -- in a tone precluding any objections -- that the brigade commander wanted me to write and perform later in the evening a sketch in the style of **The hornet**, the popular humor and satire weekly. Before I could ask "Why me?," she said that they knew from my school principal that I had been ranked first in my Language and Literature class and had been voted by my peers as the best and most promising writer. She suggested that I finish my meal quickly and go to my barrack to start writing.

With less than two hours to produce a comic masterpiece, I decided to forgo all considerations of political correctness and describe in a humorous vein my first encounter with camp reality -- its austerity, drabness and gloomy prospects for the remainder of our service in the brigade. Rather than exaggerate people's foibles and daily events into theatrical grotesqueness, which I used to do in sketches I wrote for the weekly gatherings with my close friends, I chose this time to portray the targets of my humor and satire as they actually were and let the right choice of words, the clever turn of phrase and good timing in delivery make the audience laugh. I was so absorbed in my writer's task that I did not stop even for a moment to think about such legitimate

uncertainties as: would I be calm and self-possessed or nervous and confused, and what if the audience did not laugh -- would that intimidate me and force me to skip over entire passages of the prepared script. The only other performance before a large public in which I had participated had taken place two years before, and my recollection of it was that I had been outwardly composed, but inwardly shaking with stage fright.

At 8 p.m. sharp, I was already waiting for my cue in the dining area, facing the rows of primitive tables and chairs. All seats were occupied and the clamor of young voices was enough to drown out the loudest public address system. There was no such system, however, to help carry my voice to the farthest reaches of this open-air, makeshift auditorium. Technological luxuries of this kind were reserved for such world-shattering events as Communist Party meetings and rallies.

Finally, I realized that I was already being introduced by the brigade commander. I heard only the conclusion of his introduction: "...And now, our own Hornet, our own master of humor and satire, Norbert Yasharoff."

Surprised at my own calmness and self-assurance, I read my sketch using, with the brazen audacity of an amateur, such professional performers' techniques as pauses, gestures and

variations in tone and pitch of voice. The audience greeted with frequent laughter my humorous descriptions of the camp's primitive facilities, its God-forsaken location, its harsh rules, its poorly defined work objectives, the ideological excesses of some members of its leadership, and -- last but not least -- its horrible cuisine. While keenly aware of my campmates' positive reaction, I was quite apprehensive about the leadership's response. I dared not look in the direction of the brigade commander, but I had a feeling that he was not particularly amused. That did not, however, detract from my elation at the obvious success of the sketch.

I slept well that night in the narrow space near the window allocated to me on the makeshift bed; it was the "sleep of the just" or, if you will, the "sleep of the successful performer." Totally oblivious to the sardine-like "volunteer" lying next to me and unaware that the "joint" blanket had been pulled away from me by an inconsiderate bedfellow, I did not wake up even a single time during the night and got up feeling wonderfully refreshed and cheerful in the morning. Little did I know that very soon I would be crossing from my "sunny side of the street" into the muddy terrain of political controversy.

During breakfast that morning, I was approached by the brigade commander who told me to leave the unfinished tepid tea and small lump of white cheese (the Bulgarian equivalent of feta cheese) and

follow him to his tent. There, without much ado, he came straight to the point:

"You are a subversive, do you realize that? Or maybe you are just appallingly stupid? Personally, I don't think you are stupid. You are just a reactionary who delights in needling, ridiculing and destroying the image of the camp authorities and of the people's government they represent. What do you have to say in your defense?"

By now, I was really scared and mumbled that I was simply carrying out the original assignment, namely to write sketches in the style and spirit of the official humor and satire weekly, **The Hornet**.

"Well," the commander said, " first of all you are not a reliable (read: Communist -- author's note) member of **The Hornet**'s editorial staff, and secondly you are the son of a wealthy exploiter of the people and, as our information goes, you are a supporter of Zionist ideology. Speaking of Zionism, let me tell you something: I am a Jew, but I am totally opposed to it, and what's more, if you think that my Jewishness would make me more lenient toward you, you delude yourself -- in fact, I would treat you from now on more harshly than anyone else. As of this morning, you will join the 'hard-labor detachment,' which includes all of

your fellow reactionaries. And by the way, you will continue writing the daily sketches -- but in the manner in which this conversation has made abundantly clear."

I wanted to respond with a mild protest, but he stopped me, and with a dismissive gesture, motioned me out of the tent.

Joining the "hard-labor detachment" turned out to be even worse than I imagined. At first, I did not know whether to cry or laugh. Young male and a few female "volunteers" were lifting heavy boulders from one huge heap, placing them on antiquated wheel-barrows, transporting them to another big pile some distance away, unloading them, then moving to a nearby stack, loading some boulders and bringing them back to the original heap. The scene was something right out of a Kafka novel. So much about the prospect of a future Children's Town, I thought to myself. This was nothing but a typical "penal colony," designed to re-educate "reactionary" youths by breaking their backs and their spirits and turning them into docile subjects of the Communist-installed "New Order." For a teenager like me, totally unaccustomed to hard physical labor and, for that matter, to any kind of strenuous physical exercise, the brigade's equivalent of the Gulag was truly hell. At the end of each day's punitive labor, I felt utterly exhausted and went straight to my corner of the "collective" bed for an hour's nap. Waking up on the dot at the signal of my internal clock, I applied

myself feverishly to the writing of the evening's sketch.

The hard-labor penalty for my artistic audacity made me soften the edges of my satirical shows and keep them within the politically correct bounds delineated by the brigade commander. But under the guise of imaginary situations and comical exaggerations, I still managed to shoot some target-hitting arrows at the absurdities of life and work in the brigade. I even managed to expose conditions in the "penal colony" under the camouflage of poking fun at myself for being a weakling, a "mama's boy," a spoiled brat totally unfit for the "public-spirited tasks" of the "hard-labor detachment." These indirect digs at the brigade establishment were not lost on my fellow "volunteers," who greeted each of the anecdotes with laughter and applause, and they were certainly not lost on the leaders, who were far from pleased, but could not penalize me because I stayed within the demarcation lines they had drawn for me. Limited as my creative freedom was, its exercise on a daily basis and the way the "volunteer" audience reacted to it was my only source of strength and satisfaction in that imitation concentration camp.

One evening after the show, Nadezhda came, in an unprecedented gesture of approval, to congratulate me on the quality of the sketch. But it was obvious that she had something more to tell me. Finally she blurted out that she had some big plans for me.

"Well,"she added, "you are going to be the writer, producer and director, and on-stage narrator of our brigade's entry in the national competition between labor brigades for best pageant. The competition will take place two weeks from Sunday, the last day of our stay in this camp. What do you say to that?"

I was dumbfounded, unable at first to say anything. Crossing my mind were all kinds of reservations: "Am I qualified for such a big task?;" "Can I stay within the bounds of political correctness?;" "How will I manage to write the script and conduct the rehearsals when I work in the 'hard-labor detachment' every day from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.?" Nadezhda was waiting impatiently for my response.

"I take your silence to mean that you will be only too glad to do the job," she finally said. "Besides, you have no choice, and even if you did, you will still work on the pageant as a favor to me -- we are friends, aren't we?"

"Of course, Nadezhda, anything for you."

My readiness to cooperate with Nadezhda was rewarded the following morning with the news that she had arranged for me to be released from the "hard-labor" detachment and assigned to her for exclusive work on the pageant. Eagerly, I sat down to write a "treatment," outlining my ideas for the show. I had it ready by

noontime so that Nadezhda could read it during lunch. From that point on, she was having her meals seated next to me, a move that gave me immense pleasure and a special status among my fellow "volunteers." Nadezhda was very impressed with my outline and told me to go ahead and develop it into a full-fledged script.

In four days, the writing was completed and I handed Nadezhda the scenario for a multi-media show, complete with a description of props, detailed stage directions for the scenes in which large groups of"volunteers" would be performing athletic exercises, dances, songs, and short dramatic interludes, and a running commentary to be delivered by the show's narrator, i.e. yours truly. Stylistically, my artistic brainchild belonged to the category of "montage," an art form that had become very popular under Communist rule and one that I personally found to be quite attractive as a vehicle of mass entertainment. I knew I had produced the script for a show that could compete very effectively at the inter-brigade festival, and yet, I went through an emotional seesaw during the three days that the brigade commander took to review it. The verdict, when finally delivered, was terse, but positive. "It's O.K. So, go ahead and begin work without delay," the Big Boss had told Nadezhda. She and I decided to speed up work on the production by starting immediately separate rehearsals with the different groups of performers: actors, gymnasts, dancers, and singers. We worked at a hectic pace during

the one week that separated us from Festival Sunday, and each successive day brought us a victory in the race with time and in the fight for artistic excellence. It was amazing to see how the "montage," with its 200 participants, was being transformed from the lifeless pages of a script into a lively, vibrant and colorful spectacle.

On the morning of the "contest of pageants," bus after bus carrying "volunteers" from 12 diversely located brigades began arriving at the special area we had assigned as the assembly point for all participants. At ten o'clock sharp the contest began, with the participating brigades offering -- on the whole -- some very well staged pageants. As hosts of the festival, we were the last to perform. Almost from the opening scene, our show was greeted with wild applause for its mass numbers, smooth transitions and -- to my personal surprise -- the narration that I managed to deliver without a hitch, with the best vocal strength and modulation I could muster. Within half an hour, the jury announced its decision: our brigade was proclaimed the first prize winner of the National Labor Brigade Competition for Best Pageant. Nadezhda rushed to where I was standing and gave me a warm hug.

"You were really good, Norbert," she said, adding: "I knew you were an excellent writer, but I did not know you were such a talented director and actor."

While we were hugging each other one more time, one of the judges tapped me on the shoulder and asked me if he and some of his colleagues could talk to me. After exchanging parting smiles with my favorite "commissar," I bad her good-bye and followed the judge to the jury table. While the rest of the judges, all of them connected in some capacity with the National Theater in Sofia, remained seated, a distinguished-looking gentleman rose from his chair to shake my hand. In the resonant voice of a professional actor, he wasted no time in coming to the point. Congratulating me on my performance as writer, director and actor, he said that he and his colleagues would gladly recommend to the government that I be sent to Moscow, at its expense, to receive the kind of training that would make me an accomplished stage director. Should I accept the offer, he pointed out, the judges would take immediate action so I could be in the Soviet capital in time for the start of the fall semester at the Moscow Academy of Dramatic Art. I was very moved as I shook hands with each member of the jury, thanked them profusely for their offer, and promised to give them my answer in a few days. On my way to one of the trucks that were waiting to take us back to Sofia, I could not help but feel very gratified and flattered by the high honor that the judges were ready to bestow on me. For a few minutes, I even pictured myself on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater, directing a scene from "Cherry Orchard." I knew, however, in my heart of hearts that I would never go to the country of mass purges and killings and that nothing would divert me from

my goal of getting to Palestine. A few days after my return home, I wrote my would-be sponsors a brief letter declining their generous offer for unspecified family reasons. The lingering trauma of wartime persecutions and the fresh experiences of Communist oppression made me forego, with a minimum of reluctance, what most people would have grabbed unhesitatingly as the chance of a lifetime. My career as a theater director thus ended before it had begun.

Birth of a Nation

Returning to Sofia equipped with the coveted Certificate of Labor-Brigade Service, I registered without delay with the Polytechnic College and with Sofia University for their respective entrance examinations. I applied for admission to four departments: electrical engineering (at the Polytechnic College) and law, physics and mathematics (at the university), hoping to maximize in this manner my chances of being admitted to at least one of them. As it turned out, I was accepted -- on the basis of high entrance-examination scores -- to all three university departments. For reasons that are still not very clear to me, I opted for physics.

During my first semester at Sofia University, my only extracurricular activity consisted of visits to the club of the

General Zionists, a moderately conservative movement operating under the umbrella of political Zionism. Father and I became members once it was announced that registration for emigration to Palestine would be handled by the different Zionist organizations. Since the Socialist Poalei Tzion and the right-wing Revisionist Party were too extreme for us, we joined the General Zionists, the only Zionist faction that seemed to accommodate our moderate views. As a participant in the youth section's activities, I was quickly promoted to the position of group leader. I lectured, I conducted discussions, and I read some of my rousing poems of Jewish patriotism before they were displayed on the so-called wall newspaper, another popular Communist innovation. The level of pioneering fervor in our and other Zionist organization grew by the day in anticipation of the United Nations vote on the partition of Palestine scheduled for late November 1947. I say pioneering fervor because we, young Zionists, expected to join the pioneers who were already in the Land of Israel in their efforts to ensure the survival of the small Jewish state that would be proclaimed if the U.N. voted to establish two states: one Arab and one Jewish.

The more devoted I became to my pioneering ideals, the more I felt torn between my decision to leave for Palestine ahead of my family and my pain at the thought of being separated from them for the first time in my life. On November 29, 1947, however, events settled once and for all my inner conflict. The United Nations

General Assembly voted that day, by more than the requisite two-thirds majority, in favor of creating in Palestine two independent states: one for the Jews and one for the Arabs. The British, who had ruled the country for 28 years under a mandate given to them by the League of Nations, the distant precursor of the U.N., immediately announced their intention to relinquish the authority granted to them and withdraw their forces.

The U.N. vote, which took place in the evening, was broadcast by the BBC and the Voice of America. Jews all over Bulgaria were glued to their radio sets, totally oblivious to the late hour (3 a.m. Bulgarian time when the voting began in New York). Gathered in our apartment, our entire extended family listened intently as the representatives of different nations answered the roll call by announcing their "yes" or "no" votes. We were counting the affirmative votes and, when the number of these votes reached and then quickly surpassed the required majority, our whole family heaved a collective sigh of relief and started a round of congratulatory hugs and kisses as if celebrating the birth of a baby. What we were witnessing at that moment was indeed a birth -- the birth, or rather the rebirth, of a Jewish nation.

After consuming some drinks and snacks to keep us going on this sleepless night, all of us went to the Central Synagogue for the candlelight vigil that was scheduled to take place in the event of

a U.N. vote in favor of partition. By the time we arrived, the entire street was a sea of dark figures and flickering flames. People were singing the Zionist anthem, entitled "Hope" and set to music highly reminiscent of the opening theme of Smetana's "New World Symphony." There were no speeches, but the very participation of so many Jews in a demonstration of national pride in a city and country ruled by Communists spoke volumes. Most of us were surprised that the police did not try to disperse us even when we started moving to the center of town where all government buildings were located. The reason for this benign attitude became clear in the morning when we learned from the newspapers that the Soviet Union had reacted very favorably to the U.N. vote. By 6 a.m., the huge crowd began to disperse of its own accord. Exhausted, but elated, people headed home, carrying in their hearts and minds the once-in-a-lifetime memories of the night's events.

Farewell to the Native Land

By now, Bulgaria's ruling coalition had abolished the monarchy, exiled young King Simeon II and his mother, and held so-called elections which placed total power in the hands of the Communists and their closest non-Communist allies, allowing them to turn the kingdom into a People's Republic. In the eyes of Bulgarian Jews,

the only redeeming feature of the newly installed totalitarian government was its support for a future Jewish state -- in conformity with the policy line adopted by Moscow. Otherwise, the treatment they got from the Communist authorities was as harsh, if not harsher, than the treatment to which the Fascists had subjected them. The only difference this time was that the drastic measures, especially the confiscation of property and the ban on business activity, affected all citizens, not just the Jews.

The unimpeded functioning of Zionist organizations had the Communist-intended effect of encouraging and facilitating Jewish emigration to Palestine. Even before the State of Israel was proclaimed, hundreds of Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine fully aware of the risk of being intercepted at sea by the British fleet and forced into detention camps on the island of Cyprus. Two of Aunt Bertha's sons, one freshly divorced and the other single, were among those who ended up in British captivity on Cyprus for attempting to enter Palestine illegally.

For those of us still in Bulgaria, life was being made increasingly miserable by the gang of fanatic Jewish Communists, who felt that the best way to demonstrate their own desire to stay in the country and remain devoted to the regime was by harassing us in a variety of bureaucratic and propagandistic ways. Under these

circumstances, none of us was free enough from personal worries in order to think of our savior, Dimitar Peshev, find out how he was surviving and offer help if needed. As we learned much, much later, he did indeed need all the help he could get.

In early 1948, I had a very upsetting experience that completely removed from my mind the few remaining doubts I had about going to Palestine. A Christian classmate of mine, whom I had befriended in high school, came one morning, without prior notice, to our apartment -- looking gaunt, disheveled and deeply troubled. He came straight to the point. As an active member of the Agrarian Party, a recently banned former partner in the Fatherland Front coalition, he had gone underground in order to avoid arrest and escape the fate of his many fellow Agrarians who had been summarily executed by State Security agents. Before I could say a word, Pencho (that was his name) pointed out that he was not asking me for shelter.

"I know what the consequences could be for you and your family if the comrades trace me here," he said. "What I do beg you to do for me is to use your influence and persuade your Zionist friends to include me in the list of prospective emigrants to Palestine -- so I can leave this damn country."

I could have enumerated in response all the impediments and

risks involved, for all concerned, in such a farfetched scheme. I chose, instead, to give him some moral support, assure him of my strong friendship, and promise him that I would take up his request with the leadership of the General Zionists. Barely a minute after he left, I knew that I would not communicate Pencho's impassioned plea for help to my organization; if I did that, I would be expelled as someone prepared to risk a Communist ban on emigration in order to help a Christian friend escape. While convinced that there was nothing I could do for poor Pencho, I still felt very sad and even guilty for having a chance to leave the country while he faced the probability of a summary execution. The memory of him pleading with me to save his life haunted me for a long time. It transformed itself at length into a violent disgust with Bulgaria and into an impatient anticipation of the day when I could finally leave that country forever.

This feeling was further reinforced a few weeks later when the Sofia Bar Association announced its decision to ban father from practicing his profession on the trumped up charges of his being "a reactionary, an enemy of the people who had amassed a fortune by exploiting others, and a member of the secret, right-wing Freemason Society." The truth was that father had been a lifelong liberal, a generous donor to Jewish philanthropies, a lawyer who never employed any help, except for a Christian colleague whom he quickly elevated to the status of partner, and a member of the Jewish

progressive organization B'nai B'rith, which had nothing to do with the Freemasons. The real reasons behind father's disbarrment were his wealth, his failure to jump on the Communist bandwagon, and -- paradoxically enough -- his successful defense of Dimitar Peshev, a task that was given to him by the Communists themselves. After almost 30 years in the practice of law, he was crushed and despondent at the prospect of never working as a lawyer again, not even in Palestine where, at age 52, he would have to learn a new language, study the local, British-style jurisprudence, and pass both law-school and bar examinations.

The atmosphere at home became one of utter sadness and despair. Even father, who years ago, when the Fascists were already beginning to persecute the Jews, had vowed never to leave his beloved Bulgaria, was now eager to emigrate. So was I, of course, and so was mother, anxious to join her two younger sisters and Grandma Rachel who had emigrated earlier. Our wishes were getting closer to being fulfilled as the end of Great Britain's rule in Palestine was drawing nearer. Finally, on May 15, 1948, one day after the British pullout was completed, radio broadcasts brought the dramatic news that the 600,000-strong Jewish population of Palestine had proclaimed their independent State of Israel. Jews everywhere greeted this historic event with boundless joy and enthusiasm. But barely a couple of hours later, this ecstasy was replaced by anxiety and apprehension as an avalanche of reports

from the Middle East announced that the regular armies of five Arab countries had mounted a concerted attack on the fledgling Jewish state. The Arab forces expected a rapid victory against their ill-armed and normally non-belligerent opponents. Instead, they found the stiff opposition and the firm determination of people who realized that the alternative to victory was not merely defeat, but obliteration. Within six weeks, the Israeli army and citizen soldiers -- hastily organized, but blessed with fierce devotion and inspired leadership -- succeeded in repulsing the Arab invaders on all fronts. By now it was obvious that the new state could not be overwhelmed by force of arms. From June onwards, U.N. representatives negotiated a series of truces, but they did not last for long. In every case, upon resumption of hostilities, there were further Israeli triumphs. The young state also scored a major diplomatic triumph when first the Soviet Union, and then the United States, extended to it their official recognition.

I was so consumed with developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict that everything else became of lesser importance to me. This preoccupation with the war and my burning desire to take part in it before it ended was very odd for someone like me who had always been averse to violence and brute force. But that is the way I felt, and that feeling permeated my entire existence during those last months in Bulgaria. I stopped attending lectures at the university and devoted myself exclusively to work at General

Zionist headquarters -- mainly on the registration of members for emigration to Israel.

In the meantime, the Israelis had been winning such victories as: the capture of the Arab cities of Lydda, Ramleh, and Beersheba; the penetration into the territory of Egypt proper; the conquest of Eilat on the Gulf of Akabah, thus establishing a foothold towards the Indian Ocean for the first time in Jewish history; and the daring military operation that broke the Arab siege of Jerusalem's Jewish section.

In late September 1948, leaders of my Zionist organization urged all of us in the youth section to register forthwith for emigration because two Israeli ships would be arriving in early November and December at the Yugoslav port of Bar to pick up young Bulgarian Jews as part of a recruitment operation designed to bring much needed reinforcements to the Israel Defense Forces (as the once ragtag Jewish army was now called). My Zionist dream was on the verge of realization, and that brought me great satisfaction. But it also awakened me to the personal implications of my impending departure. Suddenly it dawned on me that before deciding to embark on my patriotic venture I had failed to ask myself some very important questions. For example: how would I handle military service and was I ready to die for the cause; would my aunts and grandmother in Tel Aviv provide a supportive substitute for my

immediate family. There were times when I even thought of giving up the idea of going to Israel ahead of my parents and sister and stay in Bulgaria until we could all leave together. Such thoughts, however, had to be dismissed because a change in plans would have been construed by my friends and fellow Zionists as an attempt to avoid fighting in Israel's War of Independence. And so, conflicted but not retreating from my original decision, I continued to prepare for the journey to the land of my ancestors.

Deciding on what to take with me by way of luggage was the least onerous part of my preparations. The Communists "facilitated" the task by decreeing that our luggage should consist only of shoes, clothing, personal mementos, and documents, and should be carried in one single, government-issued sack made of rough canvas. "Leaving the country with only the shirts on our backs," as refugees throughout history have bitterly complained, came to describe almost literally our own situation.

Finally, I learned the exact date and time of my departure: the evening of December 3, 1948. The Zionist idealism and hatred of communism, which had dominated my thinking over the past several months, were now relegated to the background, replaced by a heartache that was getting more acute by the day. My parents said nothing to change my mind, but it was obvious that they were very worried and sad to see me embark on an adventure full of

uncertainty and danger.

The evening of December 3 is engraved in my memory as one of the most difficult, tense and sad experiences of my life. There was almost no conversation around the dinner table. All of us seemed to be choking on our tears, and -- besides -- there was nothing we could say that would be appropriate for the occasion. At 8 o'clock sharp, the taxicab we had ordered sounded its horn. Kisses and tearful embraces, father urging me not to hesitate to borrow money from our relatives in Tel Aviv, everybody helping me with the luggage and then I rushed down the stairs. At the courtyard gate, I turned for one last look at the house where I spent most of my life, a house to which I would not return for 43 long years.

At the station, I was engulfed by a crowd of some 2,000 agitated people who were loudly protesting against the manner in which the officials in charge (mostly Jewish Communists) wanted them to board the train's long chain of cars. The comrades insisted that this be done according to organizational affiliation, an arrangement that would have separated many family members and friends from each other. Despite the fanatical obstinacy of the notorious self-hating Jew, Jacques Nathan, who was apparently in command of the whole operation, the crowd ultimately prevailed and people took their seats in compartments of their choice.

It was close to midnight when the train finally pulled out of the station. My recollection of the 48-hour journey to the port of Bar is very hazy. I remember that I occupied one of the window seats and that next to me sat a pleasant-looking young woman. I must have fallen asleep soon after we left Sofia and woke up ten hours later when the train screeched to a halt at a Yugoslav border checkpoint. I was bathed in sweat and felt very weak. The young woman greeted me with a smile and told me that I had gone through several hours of acute fever.

We spent at least an hour at the checkpoint while Yugoslav militiamen checked the names on the collective travel document that the Bulgarian authorities had provided in lieu of the individual passports they had taken away from us. The moment we left Sofia, we were deprived of our Bulgarian citizenship and became stateless persons. Just before the train started moving again, I looked through the window for one last glimpse of my native land, and caught myself bidding it a whispered farewell strangely devoid of bitterness, but also full of relief.

"The darkness is now behind me," I thought to myself. "I have finally reached the light at the end of the tunnel."

CHAPTER 5: "ASCENSION" TO THE ANCESTRAL LAND

The Zionist term for the return of Jews to the land of their forefathers is "aliya", "ascension," denoting the elevation to a higher level of existence than that in the Diaspora.

Norbert Yasharoff's personal "aliya" coincided with the second truce in Israel's 1948-1949 War of Independence. And like most other young men who came from countries behind the Iron Curtain, he was drafted on arrival into the recently organized Israel Defense Forces. With the second truce lasting until the end of December 1948, and with all hostilities ending in U.N.-mediated armistices in February 1949, Norbert spent almost his entire military service in conditions of no peace and no war.

Crossing the Adriatic and the Mediterranean

From the checkpoint on the Bulgarian-Yugoslav border our train proceeded to the Montenegrin port city of Bar, an almost five-hour ride. The Bar railway station was located so close to the harbor that the moment we got off we were able to see the ship that was waiting to take us to Israel. The imposing vessel's name, "Pan Crescent," was painted in huge black letters across the side of its upper deck, and a blue-and white Israeli flag was fluttering in the wind from a mast in its bow. The sight was both beautiful and moving. Moving because we were looking at a floating chunk of

"Israeli territory" and that stirred in us deep emotions of Zionist pride.

These feelings were further enhanced when we got aboard the ship and realized how huge, modern, and exquisitely clean it was. We were even more impressed by the cheerful friendliness, neat appearance and young age of the scores of men and women who welcomed us and directed us to our respective decks. In addition to Hebrew, which a small number among us knew, these crew members spoke excellent English and that language became the *lingua franca* aboard ship. My knowledge of English, diligently acquired through private lessons, self-teaching efforts, and two years of instruction at school, was pretty good, but I was very reticent to use it in conversation because of lack of practice.

The greatest of all pleasant surprises since getting aboard the "Pan Crescent" was the sudden appearance of the ship's captain. Dressed in a white, short-sleeved shirt and white bermuda shorts, he looked even younger than his 20 years, an astonishing fact that became quickly disseminated among the large crowd of immigrant passengers gathered on the lower deck. A war hero of exceptional mental and physical ability, the young captain was entrusted by the Israeli government with the historic task of ferrying thousands of Jewish refugees from Europe to their new homeland. Their fascination notwithstanding, some of the older

people among the passengers could not help but voice such skeptical remarks as: "God, is this youngster going to bring us safely to Israel?" In contrast, the younger passengers, who were in the majority, became instant admirers of the ship's commander and greeted him with thunderous applause. Sabino, a member of my inner circle of friends in Bulgaria, who was traveling with me, was just as enthusiastic as I was about our youthful captain.

Looking forward to more fun and rejoicing, we rushed to our assigned cabin, washed up, changed into more casual clothes and hurried to the huge dining room where many people had already gathered even though dinner was not to be served for another hour. In the excitement, Sabino and I barely stopped to take a good look at our cabin. What did register was that it was small and windowless, that it had two bunk beds placed one above the other, and that it was equipped with a single wash-stand.

Stepping into the dining room was like moving into the Tower of Babel. Animated conversations were being conducted simultaneously in a number of Eastern European languages, in addition to Hebrew and English. It was obvious that we, Bulgarian Jews, were not the only people on board the "Pan Crescent." We did constitute the overwhelming majority, but there were also a few hundred Hungarian Jews and a sprinkling of Jews from Czechoslovakia and Poland. Many of the passengers were making their first attempts at communication

with fellow Jews from other countries and were discovering the vast cultural differences that separated them from those "foreign" co-religionists. These differences, however, did not hinder socializing -- on the contrary, they seemed to make it more interesting and intense.

Sabino and I found a small group of "Hungarians," most of whom spoke English, and engaged them in conversation. By now the ship was already in motion and I began experiencing the first unpleasant symptoms of seasickness. I was forced to leave the dining room and return to the cabin where I spent, from that point on, most of the journey to Haifa. Since Dramamine pills were not available at the ship's infirmary, I decided to follow my mother's advice and "stabilize" my stomach with small bites of the hard, garlic-seasoned, horseshoe-shaped salami she had abundantly supplied me with. And miracle of miracles, the salami did help, and by the time we reached our destination the seasickness symptoms had completely disappeared.

The last day of our voyage was December 7, 1948. Around five o'clock in the afternoon, the captain informed us over the public address system that in about two hours we would be able to see in the distance the lights of Haifa and its harbor. By 6 p.m., most passengers had already assembled on the three decks, eager to catch a glimpse of the Israeli shoreline. About an hour later, in

the evening darkness, Haifa suddenly appeared across the water in all its glory: bathed in thousands of lights, highly reminiscent of San Francisco with its many hills, displaying proudly the Baha'i Temple and its cascading gardens that looked like a giant, illuminated carpet extending all the way from the hilltop to the shore. After initial gasps and exclamations, many of us began crying with joy. We remained riveted to the magnificent sight unfolding in front of us during the ship's slow approach to the dock assigned to it for disembarkation. There were many people walking up and down the pier, but nobody looked at our ship or waved or shouted greetings of welcome. Had our Israeli brethren become so used to the influx of new immigrants that one more shipload did not make a great difference to them? As we learned later, that was exactly the reason for their indifferent attitude.

From the Ship -- Straight to the Army

Just before disembarking, the ship's public address system blared the following message: "Attention, attention, all men and women of military age should proceed to the area left of the gangplank for processing by representatives of the Israel Defense forces. As you know (well, nobody had told us expressly that!), you belong to the GAHAL (Gius Hutz La'Haretz -- Draftees from Foreign

Countries) category of new arrivals and, hence, subject to immediate conscription."

As Sabino and I got off the ship and turned to the left, I spotted among the small "reception" line of Israeli officials my own Uncle Narcisse. Knowing how important a Zionist leader he had been back in Bulgaria, I was not surprised to see him function as one of the main overseers of the disembarkation of immigrants from our country. Although he seemed engaged in an animated conversation, I got as close to him as possible, waved and shouted:

" Hi, Uncle Narcisse! Greetings from home! I am joining the army!"

He gave me a puzzled look, muttered a barely audible "Hi!", and turned away from me to resume the conversation that I had so "rudely" interrupted. Crestfallen and dazed, I let myself be pushed by the crowd of would-be soldiers in the direction of the draftees' assembly point. "What a warm welcome," I thought to myself. "Is this what I've been dreaming about all these years? Or is it because the country is still at war?" I was so upset that I went through the military registration procedure in a haze, mechanically pronouncing my name and just as mechanically accepting the slip of paper with a temporary dog-tag number on it. I suddenly "woke up" to find myself standing in a crowded bus and hearing

Sabino explain that we were being taken to an army camp.

The less than brotherly welcome on arrival was nothing compared with the rude, even hostile, reception we got at the Beit Lith Military Transit Camp. The young Moroccan Jews who had arrived the pervious day greeted us with a weird mixture of shouts, insults in French and Arabic, and an ominous wielding of pocket knives. I say ominous because hours later when we were asleep in our hammocks, those pocket knives were used by their Levantine owners to prick their unsuspecting fellow recruits from under the swinging beds so they could jump screaming, fall on the floor and provide the kind of spectacle that was obviously considered the peak of hilarity in countries like Morocco. Sabino and I spent the rest of the night sitting on the floor with our backs against a wall, taking turns as lookouts against any new pranks on the part of our wild Middle Eastern brethren. By sunrise we were still haunted by the memory of what we went through during our first night as soldiers on Israeli soil. What a way to start our military service, I said to myself. But I soon found solace in the thought that all the hardships in the world ccould not change the wonderful reality of my having finally arrived in the land of my dreams.